REVIEW ESSAY

Charles H. Long and the Re-Orientation of American Religious History

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THIS REVIEW ESSAY is a re-engagement with historian of religions Charles H. Long and his contributions to the study of religion and American religion and culture. I argue that Long provides scholars of American religious history with a much needed conceptual layering that locates "America" within the contexts of the Atlantic world, modernity, and cultural contact through exchange.[1] As such, Long defines

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[1]In this sense, my review can be understood as a response to the familiar calls of historians such as David Wills and Jon Butler for more regionally and transnationally specific studies of U.S. religions, as well as religious studies scholar (and one-time student of Long) Catherine Albanese in

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his investigations of religion as hermeneutical projects that question the unreflective and unaffected position of the colonizer in the creating and disciplining of knowledge through a discursive stylistic of scientific objectivity and ontological purity. In these ways, Long's work assists scholars in better understanding the epistemological dynamics inherent in the creation of three separate but interrelated subjects of study within the larger practice and execution of American religious history: religion, America, and American religion.[2]

RELIGIONS, KNOWLEDGE, AND CIVILIZATION

Long's work in the history of religions discipline founded at the University of Chicago in the early twentieth century is representative of the very methodologies and approaches that helped define the modern study of religion. Tracing its American lineage back to the appointment of Albert Eustace Haydon as chair of the comparative religions department at Chicago in 1919, and later to the selection of Joachim Wach as Haydon's successor in 1945, the University of Chicago's history of religions program sought to embody what German scholars of the nineteenth century had termed *Religionswissenschaft*, or the science of religion. Pioneered by Max Müller in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* of 1873, this approach consisted of a comparative philological framework that explored the relationship between the observable world of those under study and the subsequent linguistic descriptions of it. This particular history of religions approach foregrounded a hermeneutical or interpretive method in the study of religion as a direct outgrowth of the philosophies of Rudolph Otto, Edmund Husserl, and Gerardus van der Leeuw. These scholars helped form a phenomenology of

her work on metaphysical and nature religion in the United States (Butler 1990; Wills 2003). I return to the work of Albanese later in this essay in order to make the implicit argument that Long's writings and insights wield methodological influence within American religious history through such intellectual production (Albanese 1997).

[2]I approach this topic as a historian of religion in the United States who has been shaped by post-colonial studies, religious studies, and historical methodologies, including the writings of Ashis Nandy and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Nandy 2010; Chakrabarty 2008). Long's work is a product of his engagement with these various literatures both directly and indirectly. In this sense, one can read Long as post-colonial (or perhaps de-colonial) as well as historical, theological, and philosophical. He is especially important for scholars of religion in the United States because he not only illuminates that which has been obscured, namely African American religious life within the story of America, but also the conceptual structures responsible for an American cultural language of concealment. Additionally, his writings arguably preceded much of what we now understand today as transnational history, Atlantic history, post-colonial studies, and cultural histories of disciplines and their first-order categories.

religion that encouraged a sympathetic approach to its subjects and their worlds (Petro 2010).

Products of this rich intellectual lineage, Charles H. Long, Joseph Kitagawa, and Mircea Eliade went on to solidify, disseminate, and nuance the history of religions approach set out by Wach and others from the University of Chicago through their published works and the establishment of the journal *History of Religions* in 1961. Out of the three, Long has received the least amount of scholarly attention within the discipline of Religious Studies. Even though his work has played a crucial role in the formation of African American Religious Studies as part of a broader field of African American religious thought and history, it has not acquired the intellectual traction that it warrants in both these fields and in American religious history.

Long's thought is most easily accessible through his 1986 text *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Reprinted in 1996, *Significations* investigates three realms within the study of religion—the discipline's history, cultural contact within the "New World," and African American religious life within the United States.[3] For Long, the modern study of religion did not evolve or originate as if situated within a vacuum. Although the history of Chicago's history of religions program is a beginning of sorts for religion's study in the United States, a deeper history dates back to the origins of modernity found in the exploration of the non-Western world. Such exploration was not solely concerned with classification and typology, even though these two processes were integral to the creation and establishment of scientific "knowledge."

For Long and his interpreters, these investigatory methods were necessary parts of a scholarly apparatus designed to negate its own knowledge-creating faculties. In other words, his work reveals the inner workings of an explorative *hermeneutical* project that concerned both colonized and colonizer in its execution, despite the fact that the colonizer's tools were designed to extricate himself from the cultural exchange as the objective, scientific observer.[4] As historian of

[3]These three points were inspired by David Carrasco's extended review of *Significations* found at the beginning Long's reprinted text. Long situates his understanding of contact not only within the development of modernity and an Enlightenment heritage, but also within shifts in how individuals understood matter itself. Taking a cue from Eliade, Long argues that contact concerned an "imagination of matter" as "forms of the world are apprehended in human consciousness . . . as concrete modalities of meaning" (Long 1996: 27).

[4]For Ashis Nandy and David Carrasco, such colonial encounters resulted in the creation of "intimate enemies" (Nandy 2010; Carrasco 1996). As Long argues, hermeneutics implies "the mode of discourse one uses to make sense of one's data" (Long 1996: 24).

religions David Carrasco has argued, "The problem of hermeneutics is, in part, the problem of understanding the experience of colonialism which created, in part, the ground for some of our ambitions to interpret the sacred things of others" (Carrasco 1996). The challenge posed by a hermeneutical project is that its purpose is arguably to undo the very discipline it is investigating.[5] Put another way, Long's hermeneutical focus relocates the field of investigation from an-*other* community to the scholarly community, thereby initiating a process of "reading the ones doing the reading." This type of multivalent and multileveled analysis of religion's origins foregrounds the notion of concealment as a subject of deconstruction within a hermeneutics of suspicion.

The form of modernity that helped construct the worlds of others' "religions" was a form of critique of what had preceded it—namely, institutional Christianity. On one level, the Enlightenment's project of abstraction, which led to categories such as "human" and "religion," was liberating. Once exported to the lands of imagination, however, these categories became another weapon in the arsenal of colonial subjugation.[6] For Long, this irony is "something of a scandal." Forms of "evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and color symbolism" re-named and re-created "others" within languages and categories that the colonizers could understand in a nefarious process of translation.[7] This dynamic cuts to the very heart of what Long understands as "signification." Those non-Western persons who were categorized into abstractions digestible to the colonizer were signified. "This naming," argues Long, "is at the same time an objectification through categories and concepts of those realities which appear as novel and 'other' to the cultures of conquest" (Long 1996: 4). In light of Long's notion of signification, one could argue that the colonial encounter itself was in fact a product of the colonizer's religious practice. Unlike other definitions of religion, Long's is expansive enough to include a variety of cultural practices, yet specific enough to provide explanatory power to particular traditions as they move through the world in the cultural garb of the

[5]A hermeneutical project within the study of religion arguably examines the undergirding of a scholarly discipline by revealing its origins as a product of encounter between others. In relating history to hermeneutics, Long contends that "the archaeology of history and culture should be matched by an archaeology of the subject" (Long 1996: 48).

[6]"Lands of imagination" refers to the relationship between European explorers and authors who did and did not eventually encounter the people and geographies they had been dreaming about and plotting on maps and in literature.

[7]The notion of translation as that which transforms difference into abstraction can be found in Chakrabarty (2008).

oppressed and the oppressor.[8] In short, Long's notion of religion as "orientation" explains the ways in which Europeans documented and categorized an-*other* world through conceptualization and commodification. Finding European bearings meant the subjugation of others by creating knowledge about them, as Europeans gave meaning to the particular ontological stances they had taken up in the world (Long 1996: 107).

For Long, this type of analysis falls within the realm of "ideograms." More simply, Long's work concerns itself with the space between "experience and category" where the "emerging shape of thought" comes into being as the initial stages of an eventual structure of thought (Long 1996: 9).[9] In this way, Long's work intersects with the writings of Thomas Kuhn (1996), Hayden White (1973), Michel Foucault, and Dipesh Chakrabarty in his interest in and examination of how fields of knowledge are formed. This aspect of Long's thought, one that encourages hermeneutics as "the effort to understand the self through the mediation of the other," is extremely helpful in disrupting the factuality of taken-for-granted categories while opening up space for opacity to be encountered in one's analytical framework (Long 1996: 51).[10] Once we frame the modern Enlightenment project as a hermeneutic, we begin to realize how dependent it was and is on those in the spaces of sentences —the silences that fall in between words themselves. Such a relationship brings into question the possibility of the very position that undergirds scientific discovery of knowledge, namely the objective observer. "It was from this silence," argues Long, "that the Western world tried to evoke once again a sign of intimacy and relatedness to ontological meaning" (Long 1996: 66).

The origins of a scientific study of religion, including the category itself, cannot be understood without taking into account its colonial

[8]Such expansiveness may in fact be a byproduct of Long's encounter with numerous Black theologians in the 1960s and 1970s and their various understandings of Black religion as Black theology or the "Black Church." For the purposes of this review, Long's notion of religion as "orientation in the ultimate sense" preceded much of the work currently taking place in the field of religious studies on religious actors' abilities to cross and dwell within their traditions. For more, see Tweed (2006). Tweed himself admits in his text that Long's definition is "highly suggestive but mostly overlooked."

[9]One production from such a space is the category of religion. For Long, the category is a "depository of a new form of *otherness* in a double sense. . . . It [is] an *other* in terms of a correlation between the valences of geographical distance and also in terms of the qualities of the foreign as awesome and exotic" (Long 2007: 183, 198).

[10]For Long, knowledge is impossible without some form of interpretation. As the interpreter begins her investigations, she slowly comes to realize that her "being is mirrored in the reality of life and history and simultaneously in the moment of interpretation."

production through the creation of knowledge of the other.[11] Long begins such a description of religion and cultural contact by way of its organizing metaphors and their foci, including center, primitive/civilized, and cult (Long 1996: 79). Echoing his work on religion, Long contends that cultural contact as a "religious locus" cannot be understood adequately solely from the perspective of the knowledge producers. In this way, Long's hermeneutical approach reveals the fact that the colonizers understood cultural contact with an-*other* world, a New world, as a religious locus, despite the fact that this relationship has not been acknowledged "from the point of view of modern Western culture" (Long 1996: 73).

One of the ways in which "the West" removed itself from its own categorizing of others' worlds was through the creation and dissemination of "civilization" (Long 1996).[12] That which was new and unknown came to be known through terminology and archetypes of the old, most notably by way of biological and psychological vocabularies such as pathology and irrationality. The Western European universe that produced these categories was in a state of flux from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries as political, religious, and economic shifts began to transform a provincial epistemology into universal values of progress and discovery. For Long, such transitions, including the creation and usage of "civilization," signaled the beginning of a "necessary lie" that framed Europeans as superior in relation to a primitive "other."[13] Upon encountering the unknown, "taxonomies of civilization" came to the fore in order to build understanding through knowledge. Very often these taxonomies were housed within what Long and others refer to as a "psychological urge" to imagine symbolically the otherness of others (Long 2005b). Once explorers took to the high seas

[11]For philosopher Judith Butler, knowledge cannot exist without entangling itself in power. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Butler contends that "knowledge and power are not finally separable but work together to establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for thinking the world: 'It is therefore not a matter of describing what knowledge is and what power is and how one would express the other or how the other would abuse the one, but rather, a nexus of knowledge-power has to be described so that we can grasp what constitutes the acceptability of a system'" (Butler 2004: 215).

[12]Drawing on sociologist Norbert Elias, Long argues that cultural contact was a type of "civilizing process." Elias contends that civilization "works to describe what constitutes [the West's] special character and what it is proud of: the level of its technology, the nature of its manners, the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world and much more" (Long 1996: 94).

[13]"Civilization" as a category with ontological resonances emerges within the Atlantic world and finds sustenance in what would eventually be called "America" through the work of nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicals. As historian Robert Handy observes, "Researches in the primary sources convinced me that it would be fruitful to seek a fuller understanding of how Protestants related their religious views to their concepts of civilization" (Handy 1971: vii).

in search of *terra incognita* and raw resources, the imaginative cartography that had been proliferating in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries began to bend under the sheer weight of cultural encounter. This did not mean, however, that such imaginings became any less relevant or useful when the explorers encountered difference. In fact, one could argue that contact with an-*other* world solidified the civilizational episteme that resulted in both knowledge and shadow as "histories, imaginations, and meanings . . . obscured by the very clarity of the symbol of civilization" (Long 1996: 97).[14] One of the products of these imaginings in both mind and map, a space that embodied the play between illumination and obscurity, was the notion of "America."

CULTURAL CONTACT AND AMERICA

European explorers and writers alike constructed themselves in light of and in opposition to an-*other* people and an-*other* world through a process of self-fashioning. Cultural contact was much more than simply physical bodies encountering one another through touch, taste, and smell. One could interpret the actions of Europeans during such periods of contact as forms of religious practice, seeking orientation within an unfamiliar world. "It is here that religion as orientation in time and space, externally and internally, forms a locus," argues Long. "The New world was intellectually and economically a matter of ultimate concern" (Long 1996: 110). Civilized bodies emerged only in relationship to primitive bodies. A "New" world emerged in light of and through the old. European imaginations may have rendered the New world a world of bliss and pleasure, but it was upon this very epistemic tablet that explorers etched dehumanizing categories and concepts as "fantasies of evil." Drawing on historians such as Francis Jennings and J.H. Parry, Long argues that the language of "the New" rendered invisible the opacity of an-*other* world. In this way, "America" became an invention through discovery, while "the myth of the New World obscured the reality of contact" itself (Long 1996: 114). Along with the "New" world came new words and concepts such as "primitive" and "race." The practices of self-fashioning were reversed as Europeans made others into their knowledge of "the other." This process of translation took place through the use of race, as white became pure and black became dark and therefore evil. If notions of Eden painted

[14]Much of the voyaging undertaken by explorers like Columbus can be understood as "pilgrimage," which for Long acted out the "sacred ideology of the conquest and domestication of space and spaces" (Long 1996: 108–109).

pictures and images of the New world with pleasant pastels as the backdrop of cultural contact, then race served as "the theatre of the entire European myth of conquest" by means of a mythical "self-world structure" (Long 1996: 115).[15]

Despite oppressive conditions, the oppressed were not completely eradicated from the epistemological map. The ways in which such bodies and voices carved a space for themselves as a "critique of the critique" within modernity and the modern Atlantic world speaks to the creative and imaginative force for "more than life," found on the margins as a yearning for what one scholar has called a "complex subjectivity" (Pinn 2003). In the midst of a "second creation," the cradle of double consciousness, an-*other* world pushes and speaks beyond the silences of its modern ontological existence. What will happen to the study of religion when those who have been rendered silent through knowledge begin to speak? This question is at the center of Long's work and still arguably remains unanswered.[16]

As Long argues in *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, "The Atlantic world was not a revealer of deities, seers, and prophets; it is not under the sign of revelation but of freedom, civilization, and rational orders . . . it is a world justified by the epistemologies of Kant and Descartes, the English empiricists, and the ethical economies of Adam Smith and Marx" (Long 1999: 20). Such an intellectual, philosophical, and religious milieu helped produce what would eventually become known as "America" within the North American continent. Long's work is particularly helpful as he illuminates the various layers of meaning that comprised the "temporal-geographical area" eventually deemed the United States, including "the given" and "a priori" modes of knowing and meaning of the space itself (Long 2010). He is able to decipher such multileveled meanings and periods of historical change due to his utilization of scholarship from the Annales School, which takes into account the *longue durée*, *conjuncture*, and *evenementielle* as distinct but interrelated levels of change.[17] For Long, North America's religious orientation emerges once one takes

[15]For Long, the colonizers "were essentially dramatists who imposed the 'shape' of their own culture embodied in speech on the New World and made that world recognizable and habitable by them."

[16]Long hints at an answer to this question when he observes that from within colonized situations new creativities can and do emerge as survival mechanisms. "In this sense," Long argues, "I would say that the whole world is really a third world, but only the people in the empirical Third World know this" (Jones and Hardy 1988: 592).

[17]One could argue that the Annales School has influenced Long's work, including many of the pieces in *Significations*.

into account unchanging, slowly changing, and immediately changing levels of history through its Atlantic context. Within his interpretation of America, Long offers perhaps his most poignant and persuasive explanation of religion as orientation. "Orientation," he argues, "refers to the manner in which a culture, society, or person becomes aware of its place in the temporal spatial order of things . . . it expresses creativity and critique in the face of the given order of creation."[18] This particular articulation differs from his others because it names the temporal and spatial dimensions of human religious experience in addition to the individual and community productions that emerge from within these dimensions relative to systems of oppression. In this way, Long's notion of religion as orientation is able to take into account "the deeper order and structures of temporality as well as the materiality of the things exchanged and the attendant symbolic modalities of these exchanges" (Long 2010).

Long utilizes a language of "cultural contact" in order to describe the social, cultural, economic, and religious encounters between European and non-European peoples within the drama that is the Atlantic world.[19] It has served a powerful function within his theory of religion as orientation as well as in his understanding of modernity and its ways of knowing through classification, categorization, and conceptualization by highlighting the braided character of colonization, the study of religion, and modern identity formation. Both the "primitive" and the objective scientific "observer" came into being while in relationship with one another. Such insights are the result of Long's historical approach as one that explores the origins and contexts of scholarly categories, as well as of his philosophical and theological concerns for the ontological characteristics of such categories. They are also the result of his transition from a language of cultural contact, gift, and exchange to one of "contact zone" which takes place within his writings on America and its varying religious interpretations.

Linking contact zones to orientation, Long illuminates the intertwined relationship between North American and European lifeways and the ways in which their histories have been told. "As opposed to those narratives that tacitly imply that the Europeans 'knew who they

[18]"This is not a simple task," Long goes on to argue. "It is by its very nature a dialectical process, for it is precisely in the act of creating one's world that the world is understood as having been already given" (Long 2010).

[19]For Long, this Atlantic world, the very same world that framed the execution of the Middle Passage, can be understood as a space of "in-betweenness" between the continents of Africa, Europe, and the Americas, within a "history as terror" (Long 1999: 19).

were,' whereas the original inhabitants of the indigenous cultures were ignorant or debased, orientation within a contact zone provides the basis for creativity and critique on the part of all parties within it" (Long 2010). In this sense, Long deconstructs the narrative of America's "discovery" by suggesting a term of culture born of the very creativity and critique he delineates—Aboriginal-Euro-African (Long 2003a). Once the "temporal-geographic area referred to as America" has been properly contextualized as a product of encounter couched in vocabularies of the modern Atlantic world, spaces of inquiry begin to open up concerning the precision of what scholars have meant by the term "American religion." Despite the Christian underpinnings of European colonialization that became explicit in the form of missionaries and their civilizing activities, there was never one set of practices that defined the North American continent. "There has never been an American religion, per se," argues Long, "that is, a single explicit tradition with common rituals, deities, a cosmology, and so forth" (Long 2010). Despite the lack of a coherent cosmological center, many Americans and scholars of American religious history still think of themselves as possessing, participating in, and narrating a uniquely "American" religion. Ironically, Long's work subtly supports this notion by dedicating the last third of *Significations* to the "Shadows and Symbols of American Religion."

AMERICAN RELIGION, DENOMINATIONAL HISTORY, AND THE POPULAR

Regardless of geographical location, the practice of obscurity through knowledge creation of an-*other* people weaves its way through Long's analyses of modernity, the Atlantic world, and American religion. Echoing the work of novelist and social critic James Baldwin, Long argues that due to the histories of cultural contact and conquest in North America, particular cosmological and cosmogonic stories and characters have been rendered invisible in America's grand narrative of creation *ex nihilo*. According to this telling, no one occupied the North American continent before the Europeans arrived. This initiated a process in which "the West" inscribed civilization and Christianity upon the tablet of nature and indigenous bodies in the wilderness. In this way, North America and its American religion can be understood as a product of the Atlantic world's epistemologies. As such, histories of cultural contact obscure reality as much as they delineate it.

Taking on the characteristics of a "dynamic of concealment," Long contends that the history of religion in America emerges out of

"discourses of power that prevent the meaning of what really happened from becoming a part of the cultural languages of the national community" (Long 1996: 141). Drawing on the work of writer Ralph Ellison in order to support his view of America and its religion as inherently concealing, Long grounds his analysis in two images: shadow and symbols. Uniquely American symbols such as the Constitution and "the Founding Fathers" signify a particular interpretation of the nation's history—one that is couched in universality yet spoken through a particularity, namely an Anglo-American lifeway. Lifting up these symbols as paramount to American identity inevitably builds gaps into the narrative of progress and technology found in the spaces between words. Not only is this a dynamic of concealment, but it is also a dynamic of shadows, as the luminescence of civilization sparkles at the expense of those looking on from the literal and figurative darkness of their beings. In this sense, the symbols and shadows of American religion are inextricably intertwined—reinforcing one another within the breadth of the Atlantic world and its modern valences. By listening to those who speak from the shadows, we will begin to move beyond simply shifting the content of the history of American religion and commence what Long calls a "change of structure and style."

Recalling his approach to the study of modernity and the Atlantic world, Long utilizes the language of hermeneutics in order to highlight the intersubjective nature of cultural contact, conquest, and knowledge building in North America. In order to begin such an analysis, he foregrounds misinterpretation as that which must be located, named, and brought to life within the larger story of American religion. Once again echoing Baldwin and Ellison, Long argues that Americans and interpreters of American religion suffer from "the inability . . . to come to terms with the reality of the obvious" as a product of both a "false consciousness" and an "atrophy of the imagination" (Long 1996: 149). This inability is closely related to the profound ability to suppress and conceal in the form of a willed American innocence. For Long, this innocence is an outgrowth of what historian Sidney Mead defined as the inner and outer experiences of American history. Stories of triumph and conquest reveal themselves through the outer experiences of American exploration, while the inner experiences of conquest's casualties—the blood, sweat, and tears of North America's indigenous and imported peoples—have been willfully hidden from national memory and languages. Within Long's usage, Mead and Ellison work off of one another in establishing "invisibility" as a theme of American religion and American civil religion. Through a hermeneutics of "conquest and suppression," American cosmogonic language "conceals the inner

depths . . . while at the same time it renders invisible all those who fail to partake of this language and its underlying cultural experience" (Long 1996: 163).[20]

Long's work explores the overarching frameworks within which knowledge arises about an-*other*. In this way, he engages the structure and style of epistemology, rather than content in a strict sense. Such a methodological dynamic helps explain Long's reliance on theorist Michel Foucault's work in the form of an "American episteme." Not unlike a Kuhnian "paradigm," Long argues that the American episteme can only be known through the content or data it creates about itself and others. "Once this [data] is revealed, we are able to see the contradiction; it constitutes a coherence encompassed by a contradiction" as a problem of desire (Long 1996: 168). In order to expose and engage such a coherent contradiction, scholars must encounter an-*other* West through the "otherness" of humankind. For Long, this becomes evident by acknowledging the positivity of the distance and otherness of the black community in America as a manifestation of the opaque. Such distance may cause tensions, but these tensions are necessary in the work of unearthing concealed histories and bodies in the story of American religion. Within this framework, understanding takes precedence over knowledge due to its dialogical nature and openness to the "other" as *mysterium tremendum*. Individuals experience the power of these moments as the formidable knowledge structures of modernity become provincialized by way of the rediscovery of a people's first creation. Suppressed opaque peoples search for an authentic space and place of expression grounded in the traditions of the first creation as a response to the concreteness and "hardness" of life. For some, this is a search for the wholeness of a black interior (Alexander 2004). For Long, orientation is paramount for both the subjects and writers of history in carving out a place for the invisible ones within the grand stories of America, religion, and American religion.

One way in which religious and racial particularity emerges on the U.S. religious landscape is through denominational affiliation. Although these studies oftentimes lead to purely confessional histories, Long argues that such an analytical framework may in fact open up space for investigations concerning not only denominational life, but also national religious life within the United States. The interrelationship between a "religion of the Republic" and denominations begins to

[20]For Long, the invisibility that describes indigenous and black experiences of American life is equaled only by the invisibility found deep within the consciousness of Anglo-Americans.

answer the question of how a nation grounds itself in primordial religious meaning when it has spurned traditional understandings of Church in favor of denomination (Long 1994: 100). Another aspect of this uniquely American religious formulation is its relationship to the land it occupies. Unlike other people groups, Americans cannot and do not see themselves as the original inhabitants of North America, despite the histories that are told of cities built upon hills in the wilderness. "Thus," argues Long, "the formulation of their notion of being in a place is primarily one of 'self-construction' as a primordium of their being" (Long 1994: 100). As a result of this type of identity formation, religious life in America is as diverse as the variety of relationships that exist relative to "America" as a temporal–geographical space in addition to the previous lands from which immigrants have arrived. If the land yields diversity, then national religious identity acts as a Bergerian "canopy" in uniting and maintaining American-ness in the form of a "civil religion" or "religion of the republic." It is at this intersection of generality and particularity, the tension between denomination and American religion, where histories of U.S. religious lives are most fruitful.

Long contends that "the religious situation in America might enable us to change both our notion of religion and the religious institution itself" (Long 1994).[21] Once grounded within North America as part of the modern Atlantic world, we find that Americans, like and unlike other nations, have established ultimate religious authority not in the apparatus of the state, but in the citizenry. This dynamic is part and parcel of a system of government that protects religious expression while monitoring establishments of religion. Although a religiously conceived authority is not "the ultimate common authority for the legitimation of the state," America still possesses, as Long points out, an apparatus that legitimates a form of secularized Protestantism that privileges particular forms of individuality, belief, and religious freedom conducive to state formation and its maintenance. However, as scholars have recently pointed out, such "religious freedom" may in fact be defined by the very religious authorities thought to be protecting religious traditions' freedom to practice their individual and collective religious expressions (Fessenden 2007; Sehat 2011). It is in this sense, one of argumentation and negotiation, that Long suggests studying denominational understandings of ideas such as freedom, liberty, and religious

[21]One insightful observation of a uniquely "American" religion as denominations is its "way of having a religion without being forced to say what it is" (Long 1994: 102).

freedom as a way of accessing denominational history from another angle—one that is not quite so informed by a homogenous Protestant mainstream. As part of an ongoing search for identity within modernity as "Americans," denominational history "defines the field of contestation not only in regard to the meaning of absolute authority (God) but equally in regard to civil authority and identity" (Long 1994: 103). In short, denominations seem to represent a locus where Americans come to define themselves as Americans. This was accomplished in opposition to not only an "Old World" and its forms of church-state relations, but also "an-*Other* World" and its racialized non-Western forms of life. America may be able to know itself opposite a monolithic Europe, yet the nation continues to wander in the wilderness of categories, classifications, and conceptualizations as inheritors of epistemologies of the Atlantic world.

Despite the benefits of studying American denominations as a way of understanding both national and community-based forms of religiosity, there are some shortcomings to such an approach. The category of "denomination" describes religious diversity aptly, yet it falls short in describing who and what might fall outside of mainline or mainstream Protestantism within the United States. "Nonmainline Protestant groups, Jews, blacks, and Roman Catholics, for example, do not fit easily within this category," argues Long. "The category must suffer from too many qualifications to be adequate to the religious experience and expression of such diverse groups" (Long 1994: 104).[22] In light of these deficiencies, denominational history can still prove to be fruitful in illuminating U.S. religious life and its encounter with racial and ethnic difference. Long encourages a more comparative approach to the study of denominations, including the study of new religious movements in Japan and the works of sociologist Max Weber on religions in China and India. One could also treat "denomination" as a prism through which religions outside Christianity have to construct themselves within the confines of the American nation state. Such an approach is especially useful in the study of religious architecture. Immigrant transnational churches bring their own styles and aesthetics to America as a way of solidifying and maintaining a sense of community in a foreign land, yet at the same time building design reflects their peculiarly American context through the influence of their

[22]Such inadequacies arguably do not take into account "cults in America," including those studied in the early twentieth century by anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset (Fauset 1970). The category of denomination also does not take into account the traditions of the indigenous peoples of North America.

denominational counterparts.[23] In this way, studies of denominations reveal vibrant communities orienting themselves to the world through their religious practices, cultures, and social organizations. Set within the canopy of civil religion, denominational study may even reinforce and challenge its breadth as a theme that speaks for and to an American identity. As products of the Atlantic world, America and its denominations serve as entry points into the legacies of contact zones, the cultures that were forged through violence and creativity, and the knowledge of an-*other* world constructed through Ellison's inner eye.

Thus far, religion, America, and American religion have been explored within a variety of geographical, philosophical, and epistemic contexts in an effort to foreground themes of contact zones, orientation, and concealment in the study of modernity and religious life in North America.[24] Numerous studies have explored these intersecting motifs, including those focusing on pragmatist and primitivist Pentecostals, appropriations of "the modern" by various religious actors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the gradual silencing of divine tonalities in favor of audible absence (Wacker 2001; Schmidt 2002; Lofton 2005). These types of studies not only encourage exploration of either ignored or ostracized American religious traditions and idioms both within and outside of the Academy, namely "rural" Pentecostals, "primitive" African Americans, and Enlightenment religious cultures, but they also animate future work on the relationship between myth-making, print cultures, and religious identity formation in America. In short, these works and others point scholars to a level of "popular" expression as a way of understanding the history of religion and Christianity in the United States. Long's work adds to this already rich conversation by illuminating the "popular" as an academic category, examining its relationship to notions of religion, and grounding its manifestation in a variety of cultural contexts ranging from the industrialized to the agrarian. Long's work on "popular religion" thickens the discussion thus far of American religion in North America by adding an additional level of analysis—modes of transmission.

For Long, studies of "the popular" begin with the European writings of Giovanni Battista Vico and Johann Gottfried Herder from the late

[23]Catherine Albanese's work in *Retelling US Religious History* highlights architecture as a way of understanding adaptation, contact, exchange, and gifting within narratives of American religious history (Albanese 1997). For additional examples, see Warner and Wittner (1998).

[24]For studies of modernity located within urban, African American settings and vocabularies, see Dinerstein (2003) and Baldwin (2007). For a recent study of African American religious life in the early twentieth century, see Hardy (2008).

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Delving into the creativity and cultural productions of "the people," Vico and Herder distinguished "the *populari*" from "the *volk*" in an attempt to describe communities related to but outside the European Enlightenment and its various civilizing processes (Long 2005a). The writings of Vico, Herder, and others reflected a communally oriented, European search and desire for origins, the primitive, or as Long puts it, the archaic, as an expression of "popular religion." As research deepened on folk modes of literate and oral cultures, including the work of the Grimm Brothers on fairy tales, an emphasis on various "genres of transmission" emerged as a source of popular religious reflection and production.[25] As a result, scholars began to understand genres of writing including folktale, song, art, and myth as "sources of the religious sentiment in the traditions of popular religion" (Long 2005a: 7325). Scholarly apparatuses abounded once these "genres of transmission" fell within the academician's purview. Long limits his study to three such disciplinary approaches as a way of documenting "popular religion" and its corresponding historiography: history, anthropology, and the sociology of knowledge.[26] All three orientations serve to demonstrate the "popular" elements of American religion through its creation of an aforementioned civil religion and a variety of esoteric traditions located within culture, social change, and global structures.[27]

Within the United States, "popular religion" can refer to commonly held values, beliefs, and rituals on a variety of societal levels. On the

[25]Despite the usefulness of "the folk" as a category, it does not represent an a-historic, essentialized category of analysis. As cultural critic and historian Robin D.G. Kelley has argued, terms like "folk," "traditional," and "authentic" are caught up in binaries that are often not acknowledged as products of historical agents. "'Folk' and 'modern' are both mutually dependent concepts embedded in unstable historically and socially constituted systems of classification," argues Kelley. "In other words 'folk' has no meaning without 'modern.'" For more, see Kelley (1992: 1400–1408).

[26]Historical and anthropological approaches reveal the "modes of experience and expression of religion at the various levels of the cultural strata" while showing the "dynamics of the interrelationships of the popular forms with other cultural strata." The sociology of knowledge focuses on the "genesis, contents, and mode of thought and imagination present in popular religion" while societal strata take part in the "values, meanings, and structures of popular religion" (Long 2005a: 7326).

[27]Such creations have often been at the expense of minority communities in the United States, as outlined earlier through Long's work on opacity, concealment, and Ellison's inner eye. As Long and historian of American religion Josef Sorett have argued, "the popular" both names and excludes those of African descent from participating in a mainstream "American religion." For Sorett, "It is important to note that the very politic that reproduces Christianity's popularity as the normative religion is tied to the history that also established the category of 'popular culture' as a marker of those people (i.e., African Americans) excluded from mainstream power. In this light, black religion is by definition popular (read: nonwhite, nonelite)" (Sorett 2009: 533–548).

level of the state or nation, such worldviews, which include cosmologies and cosmogonies, come to encompass the collective consciousness of the populace in what sociologists since the late 1960s have called a "civil religion." This form of popular religion provides the nation with a "generalized rhetoric and norm for the meaning and discussion of religion within the context of the culture in which it is found." In light of the hegemonic status of Christianity within the United States, the nation's civil religion will assume many of the images, symbols, and vocabularies associated with an Anglo-centric version of Christianity, thus becoming "the 'natural' and normative language of religion in general, and the secular forms of cultural life as well" (Long 2005a: 7327). Another form of popular religion in America that runs parallel to the civil religion is defined by "esoteric belief and practices" usually found "in the lower strata of society." If America's civil religion can be defined by a normative Christianity in general and its evangelical form in particular, then lower strata esoteric traditions can be understood as including astrology, the occult, magic, the metaphysical, and spiritualism.[28] Although the content of these two forms of popular religion may differ despite their cohabitation in the United States, they share a common orientation and status relative to "the people"—the popular. In this sense, "religion" can be understood as not only a mode of orientation, but also as a mode of transmission within a given community. The content of such transmissions is important for understanding the nature of American popular religion, but for Long the type of "cognition" that is fostered and facilitated by such modes is of the utmost significance.

At its most basic level, Long's notion of "the popular" describes "a mode of transmission of culture" that directly concerns the nature of its dissemination and broadcast capacities. When something becomes "popular," it signals the "universalization of its mode of transmission." Within industrial countries like the United States, such modes can include anything from newspapers to the latest form of electronic media. As "popular," religion itself comes to possess and function as "one of the primary modes of transmission of the cultural tradition" (Long 2005a: 7328). In this sense, studies of the variety of American popular religions would be concerned with not only the cohesiveness and integration of civil and esoteric religion, but also with minority traditions as accessed through oral and text-based counterpublics and

[28]For more on these traditions in American religious history, see Butler (1990). Such religious formations are not utterly separate from explicitly Christian forms of religiosity.

sources, including language, television, and music.[29] In these instances, scholars come to understand popular religion through "modes of experience" as expressed through media for the purposes of both continuity and change.

Rituals of initiation or renewal, ones that shape individual and collective experience as mediated through various modes of transmission, serve as prime locations for change on both a societal and cultural level. For Long, a locus for such change can be found in the idea of "a new mode of being." These cultural and religious processes do not smother completely the improvised creativity and originality of indigenous communities, who compose their religious lives from the existential resources available to them. In fact, it is these moments of encounter, moments that define the American religious tradition as a contact zone, that give rise to new popular religions in all of their unpredictable and improvisational splendor.

CONCLUSION: CURRENT AND FUTURE STUDIES OF RELIGION, AMERICA, AND AMERICAN RELIGION

One could argue that American religious historians and scholars of religion do not yet realize how influenced they have been by Long's work—namely, its breadth and depth through its historical, philosophical, and theological underpinnings. Long prefigured many fields of study currently in vogue today, including Atlantic history, post-colonial history, and de-colonial studies. His primary publication, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, also gestures to the contemporary fascination with culture and its popular productions through media and its varying collections of signs, symbols, and images. In fact, Long's book itself as a material production signifies a form of creativity and connectedness to histories of involuntary passages and imagined primordial home spaces. "The Middle Passage—chained enslaved Africans in the holds of several ships of every Atlantic maritime nation—was never forgotten by the Africans, neither during slavery nor in freedom," argues Long. "The watery passage of the Atlantic, that fearsome journey, that cataclysm of modernity, has served as a mnemonic structure, evoking a memory that forms the disjunctive and involuntary presence of these Africans in the Atlantic world" (Long 1999: 14). Within this frame of reference, the cover of the second edition of Long's *Significations* contributes to and reflects this

[29]For one example of this type of counterpublic, see Higginbotham (1993).

mnemonic structure as flows and streams of water pass over rocks and boulders in a cascading of liquid memory.[30] The cover also signifies a synergistic amalgamation of image, symbol, and sign as a product of a particular community and individual remembrance of creativity in the face of death and dehumanization.

This very creativity, and the "terror of history" within which it manifested, has been taken up by scholars of African American religious life in the United States and the larger Atlantic world in ways that reflect a strong Longian influence. Religious studies scholar James A. Noel's (2009) book *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* is just one of these contemporary studies. The first full-length monographic treatment of Long's thought, Noel explores the meaning of religion, matter, and modernity within the theater of the Atlantic world. Like Long, Noel understands modernity in epistemological, religious, and material dimensions, focusing on the modern's context as defined by exchange, contact, and colonialism. Materiality defined the nature of exchange in the Atlantic world and as such was deeply ingrained within various religious worldviews, including those that defined an-*other* world as knowledge.[31]

Scholars influenced by Long use his emphasis on culture and creativity as a way of drawing art and music into their analyses of black religion as a product of the Middle Passage. A footnote found in Anthony Pinn's *Terror and Triumph* perhaps best explains the challenge of Long's work to those who study religion and African American life today. "The problem of modernity is the major contention black religious studies must wrestle with," argues Pinn. "In this way, Long . . . poses the negro as a modern creation as the underlying issue students of black religion must address" (Pinn 2003: 241n1). In short, the history of the black body in modernity undergirds these two scholars' methodological approaches to the study of black religion as the play between first and second creations from the sixteenth century to the present.

[30]For Long, such a mnemonic structure can be heard and read in Negro spirituals such as "Wade in the Water," "Deep River," and "Roll, Jordan, Roll," in addition to the Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Long's book cover arguably participates in the very same lineage of memory. As far as contemporary music goes, one could argue that hip-hop is also a creative response to adverse living conditions. Additionally, the MC's ability to "flow" is not only paramount to success but also reveals hip-hop's connection to water images and descriptions of its movements.

[31]Noel's focus on materiality reflects Long's older and more recent work as seen in Long (2007) and Long (2003b).

Charles Long's work represents a multilayered and multidimensional project implemented through historical, philosophical, and existential vocabularies in order to best represent human beings' various orientating practices. Located in the crucible that is the Atlantic world and its corresponding epistemology, modernity, Long reveals that which has been veiled in the encounter with an-*other* people—namely, religious and racial difference and its own orientating practices. In such work, the objective observer becomes as much a part of the contact and exchange as the observed, thus rendering the categories created to study "the other" both dependent upon the non-West and revealing of the West as provincial. In this way, Long's work, along with his subjects, can be described as disjunctive relative to universal constructions of history.

For Long, the study of religion depends on the ability of future scholars to encounter difference within their own histories as "other Wests." Listening to and observing black and brown bodies that have been discursively and physically dissembled and reassembled in the name of knowledge arguably hold the key to an invigoration of religious studies as a discipline. As a frame of reference, a mode of orientation, modernity and its epistemologies explain only so much in light of the diversity of religious expressions across the globe. Through explorations of cultural contact and its zones of contestation, Long's work illuminates the invisible by unearthing the blindness within structures of knowledge. Most importantly, Long demonstrates why such blindness is necessary in the creation of knowledge of an-*other* world. His work encourages scholars to exercise a preferential option for what ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon has called the "epistemological privileges of the oppressed" as knowledge forged under high-pressure subjugation and systemization for the purposes of survival and creative triumph (Cannon 1995: 11). Long's texts make valuable contributions to the study of religion because they rework the discipline from the inside in order to reorient the study itself toward a post-Christian future. Long's initial work may have been produced within a milieu where hegemonic Christianity reigned supreme, but his own orientation was both broader and indebted to such a religious context.[32] For this reason, *Significations* and other such publications will be revered and ignored—admired and avoided for their candor and intellectual rigor which look

[32]These particular observations about Long's context were the result of a conversation I had with Cornel West on November 16, 2010 in Princeton, NJ.

beyond the theological for insights into African American life in the United States (Curtis 2012).[33]

Long's work in *Significations* and elsewhere is essential for studies of U.S. religious history that seek to re-frame consensus narratives of religion in North America. For Long, signs, symbols, and images were (and arguably still remain) the prime locations for investigating the Atlantic world's modern epistemology and its effects on non-Western communities. It is my contention that such collective locations of identity, especially when considered within the realm of the colonized, continue to be the building blocks for a re-forged and re-defined study of religion, and its histories within the United States, for the twenty-first century.

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[33]In a recent special issue of *Religion*, American religions scholar Finbarr Curtis echoes the importance of Albanese emphasized here, although in a slightly different register, and references Long to a somewhat lesser extent. Both discussions, however, speak to the continuing influence of each scholar's work in the study of American religion. For Curtis, Albanese's work simultaneously contributes to greater thematic and topical inclusion within the study of American religion and challenges the incessant calls for more diversity within narratives of America's religious history by accenting their implicit liberal Protestant biases. These appeals to diversity can be seen as both a reflection of the historic connections between American notions of liberty, freedom, and religion as outlined by Curtis and the academic desire to see the unfolding of human agency in every miniscule bodily act. Fellow contributor to the special issue, historian, and religious studies scholar Kathryn Lofton has perhaps been the most vocal proponent of studies that reveal the "structures of freedom" within therapeutic projects for one's best self that work and "format *against* improvisation" (Lofton 2011: 16–17). Curtis categorizes Albanese's work as part of an intellectual project that pushes beyond the traditional religious boundaries of Protestant denominationalism in order to reveal the rich legacy of metaphysical religion in North America. This type of research speaks directly to Long's understanding of and methodological emphasis on "popular religion" within North America as part of multiple "combinative" esoteric traditions (Albanese 2007). Curtis places Long alongside other scholars who push for a more global orientation in the study of American religions in order to avoid contributing to a Euro-American epistemic hegemony. Despite the fact that Long's work receives less attention than Albanese's in Curtis' rendering, it has contributed to analyses that examine the intersections of race, power, and religion in the Atlantic world. As such, Long has arguably been a significant contributor to studies that for Curtis serve as the "most important theoretical advances in the study of American religions" (Curtis 2012: 364).

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