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LONG TIME COMING:  
THEOLOGY, METHODOLOGY, CULTURAL THEORY

**I**N TERMS OF ELABORATING AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY for the study of religion, one of the most important contemporary thinkers is Charles H. Long. In his now classic book, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Long develops a notion of cultural contact that incorporates issues of materiality, politics and power without sacrificing theoretical complexity or ignoring important and influential philosophical ideas. Cultural contact occurs paradigmatically between the West and its Others, those peoples defined or signified as non-Western, and this contact is not innocent or neutral. On the other hand, scholars of religion cannot simply maintain the theoretical categories of the West while attempting to liberate oppressed and marginalized peoples and voices. Long draws attention to the third that is generated by the contact of signifying and signified peoples, and shows that even though there exists a power asymmetry, the signified also signify the signifiers.

This model of cultural contact avoids assimilating others to the self or the same, and it also prevents a naïve realism or romanticism, which assumes an immediate access to the other(s). Long draws upon W.E.B. DuBois to cultivate a double-consciousness or a double vision, which refers to an ability to think religion from the standpoint of the oppressed and the oppressors, the signifiers and the signified. “The veil, the double consciousness, is a critical stance, and they speak of primordial experiences and histories as the locus of new resources not yet categorized and rationalized by the communities under criticism,” Long writes.<sup>1</sup> This notion of double vision can be correlated with Derrida’s discussions of double reading and double writing in *Dissemination* and other works, and represents both a demand upon and an opportunity for religious reflection. Furthermore, Long traces the tragic conditions and effects of signification to the “discovery” of America in the fifteenth century and the absence of any genuine

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Study of Religion* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group, Publishers, 1999), 179. This is a reprint of the Fortress Press edition originally published in 1986.

cultural contact and exchange, and he declares that “the basic problems that confront us as a nation today result from the fact that we have not taken the integrity of nature seriously. The exploitation of blacks and other racial minorities stems from this fact.”<sup>2</sup> The myth of innocence arising from the figuring of America as a new world and virgin land with natural resources to be exploited continues to fund a powerful economic and military empire that today signifies Arab Muslims as “other,” as dangerous terrorists masking the ideology of the extension of geopolitical power and the material reality of oil in the Middle East and Central Asia. Most of us choose to fiddle or watch television while the provinces of the postmodern (Roman) empire burn.

Long emerges out of the Chicago School of the History of Religions associated with the figures of Joachim Wach, Joseph Kitagawa and above all, Mircea Eliade. Russell McCutcheon has emerged as a vocal, prolific and oft-cited theorist concerning debates about the nature and study of religion. In *The Discipline of Religion*, he repeats his critique of Mircea Eliade as a representative of the History of Religions, which affirms religion itself as an autonomous, *sui generis* phenomenon. The attack on Eliade and his legacy has dominated many recent controversies and debates about the nature of religion and its academic study, and McCutcheon has been the most visible, if not necessarily the most persuasive, critic. As Tyler Roberts points out in a recent essay in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, McCutcheon’s appeal to normative social scientific methods and terms is not innocent, but rather constitutes a “prescription for a new protectionism.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, McCutcheon’s blind spot is rendered most visible in his uncritical use of the term theology, according to Roberts.

In *The Discipline of Religion*, McCutcheon draws attention to the social formation of religion as an object of academic study in North America, and pays particular attention to the invention of the discipline by the Chicago school of the History of Religions. In reconstituting that history, he overlooks Charles Long as an important figure who contributed to that discipline. McCutcheon mentions Long’s name once in a list of names in parentheses along with Eliade, Wach and Kitagawa, but he fails to cite any of Long’s works or include his name in the index.<sup>4</sup> I want to suggest that a careful reading of *Significations* makes it clear that Long does not argue for the autonomous integrity of religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon as that notion is commonly understood and criticized. Rather, Long

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<sup>2</sup> Long, *Significations*, 160.

<sup>3</sup> Tyler Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72/1 (March 2004) 143-72, quote 146.

<sup>4</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69.

exposes religion and the study of religion to other forces and other pressures, material and ideal, but he does not seek refuge in a positivistic conception of the social sciences that would lend a veneer of academic respectability, which McCutcheon and others do. In addition, Long provides methodological tools that continue to be valid and useful for theorizing religion, and important precisely in terms of the relationship between theology and the academic study of religion.

In an essay on “Theologies Opaque,” Long reflects on the work of James Cone and Vine Deloria as opaque theologies, which is what gives them their distinctive quality as theologies of freedom or liberation. In a striking passage, Long affirms that

If God is red, if black is beautiful, then this modality of the Godhead has always been the case and there are those who have lived this testimony. The opacity of God forms a discontinuity with the bad faith of the other theological modes. There is a theology of accusation and opposition which is to the fore in the theologies opaque.<sup>5</sup>

Long endorses both the insights and the goals of such opaque theologies, because they assist in clarifying the false transparency of normative theological modes. Strikingly, however, he goes on to distinguish his work from that of these liberation theologians.

But it is precisely at this point that these theologies should not move forward to possess the theological battlefield wrested from their foes. It is at this point that theologies opaque must become deconstructive theologies—that is to say, theologies that undertake the destruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.<sup>6</sup>

Long turns toward the signification of a new form of freedom, which would not be reflected or captured in traditional theological modes, but is rooted in the experiences of the oppressed, in “the absurd meaning of their bodies.”<sup>7</sup> Long does not abandon God, or the peoples who have been signified and oppressed by Western histories and categories, but crawls back through this history in order to grope towards a new myth that can more adequately symbolize our religious experience, borne out of contact and conflict. In her book *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference*, Ellen Armour makes a similar move with her critique of “whitefeminism” and her appeal to Derrida’s thought as a way to make these marks of difference, whether racial, sexual, or even theological, more

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<sup>5</sup> McCutcheon., *Discipline of Religion*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> McCutcheon., *Discipline of Religion*, 209-210.

<sup>7</sup> McCutcheon., *Discipline of Religion*, 211.

opaque.<sup>8</sup>

According to my reading of Long, he is gesturing towards the type of self-critical theology affirmed by Tyler Roberts, and found in the work of Charles Winquist, Eric Santner and Francis Fiorenza, when he concludes:

I suspect that one reason for the intellectual “turn to religion”—in postmodern, especially phenomenological, but also in political and psychoanalytic theory—is that theology, even in its more traditional forms, engages in something like ideology critique, but only at the same time that it holds to (and criticizes) commitments and values that it knows are fallible and inadequate. To the extent that it holds to what I take to be the self-deconstructive imperative imposed by the name “God” (and admittedly, there is much theology that does not do this), theology may be able to teach us something about how we can hold together our values and our knowledges in a relationship of mutual exposure.<sup>9</sup>

Long, coming out of the History of Religions tradition, offers insights into thinking about religion both methodologically and theologically. According to Long, however, the discipline of theology is too thin to adequately express and explain religion, which is why he hopes that “opaque theologies in their deconstructive tasks will be able to make common cause with folklorists, novelists, poets, and many other nontheological types who are involved in the discernment of these meanings.”<sup>10</sup> The History of Religions incorporates a thickness and a concreteness of lived experience, both material and reflective, that functions to pressure the study of religion in fruitful ways. In an analogous way, the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* appeals to culture and cultural theory in order to supplement radical theological thought and provide a requisite thickness for theorizing religion both methodologically and epistemologically. On the other hand, *JCRT* stakes out an explicitly theoretical mission that refuses to privilege quantitative methods or dissolve its intensive inquiry into empirical phenomenal studies. Cultural theory does not replace the History of Religions, but at its best it may serve as a substitute by fulfilling an analogous role in theorizing religion.

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<sup>8</sup> See Ellen Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Armour does an excellent job relating and distinguishing racial and sexual difference in relation to feminism, womanism, Irigaray and deconstruction, but her references to and treatment of theology are implicit and inchoate. I wonder if God is merely another cite for feminist reflection and critique, or whether it makes an important difference. That is, is Armour’s training in theology and her citation of feminist theologians accidental or necessary to her general project?

<sup>9</sup> Roberts, “Exposure and Explanation,” 167.

<sup>10</sup> Long, *Significations*, 210.

Attention to Long's thought helps move us beyond a level of debate between humanities and social sciences as the proper domain for the study of religion. These debates for or against religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon, or for or against the legacy of Eliade, betray a certain sterility and at times even stupidity. Finally, scholars of religious thought and theology need to interface with the most sophisticated theoretical representatives of the History of Religions, or methods for the comparative study of religion. Long's work is exemplary, but we could also mention Jonathan Z. Smith, David Chidester, Tomoko Masuzawa, David Carrasco, Lawrence Sullivan and Philip Arnold. One agenda or opportunity for theorizing religion would be to triangulate 1) theoretical methods of the History of Religions, understood broadly rather than narrowly as the Chicago School, with 2) Continental philosophy and 3) radical theology in a way such that cultural theory in its broadest sense would serve as a background or catalyst for this complex encounter. If one believes that such an agenda is important, and wants to subscribe to it, then my contention here is that Long's work could lead the way.

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