Introduction: The Stuff of Creation

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In the Spring of 2002, a group of historians of religion gathered at the University of Maine at Farmington for a series of discussions concerning religion and modernity. This gathering, which broadly focused on what the historian of religion Charles H. Long has called the *religious imagination of matter*, was the mainspring for the essays in this volume. In exploring the wide-ranging interplay between religion and material structures, our initial conversations returned repeatedly to a number of common themes relating to the nature of religion in the modern era; among these were (i) the significance of place, (ii) the experience of limitation, and (iii) the property of peripheral vision. These essays, which materialized from our preliminary discussions in Farmington, together constitute a panoramic exploration of religion from the perspective of these themes.

From the outset, our authors share a particular presupposition regarding the definition of religion. Taking a cue from Charles Long, who regards religion as an ultimate mode of human orientation, the authors begin with a rather simple assertion that religion is about *being human in a human place.*[1] At first glance, the definition might seem too nebulous to facilitate discussion; but it comprises a number of explicit corollaries that render it more practical than might initially appear. First, the assumption that meaning is related to place relates the meaning of being human to negotiations with things other than the human. Second, by virtue of this negotiatory stance, the meanings humans forge for themselves necessarily involve some measure of peripheral vision in relation to limits posed by things other than the self. In essence, these "things" are the *stuff of creation*, from whose peripheries all conditions of what we call religion emanate.

Creations—or worlds—are not simply given. To be human in a human place requires a fundamentally creative mediation. The experience of limits (things other than the human) is intrinsic to existence, but it is by means of the religious imagination that such confrontations are rendered other than arbitrary: religion makes it possible for human existence to matter, and for the matter (the stuff) of existence to be anchored within an intelligible world. In exploring the meaning of being human in a human place, one cannot evade the language of religion;

and as we trace these meanings in a variety of contexts, our contributors to this volume invoke this language. Myth, ontology, hierophany, shamanism, as well as other frankly religious conditions, are the discursive tools to which we have recourse in deciphering the modes by which we confront our limits, and come to know ourselves and our worlds.

In his essay, "Matter and Imagination," Kees Bolle suggests that the context for arriving at an understanding of what it means to be human has, in our post-Enlightenment era, often assumed extraordinary proportion: this work, which Bolle argues is fundamentally religious, has been undertaken by the scientific community in its quest to apprehend the meaning of the human in relation to the universe from its most expansive, to its minutest—atomic—form. Yet, as Jim Perkinson points out, concomitant with the pursuit of knowing the human in relation to all conceivable forms of matter, has been the colonial and post-colonial enterprise of controlling matter (i.e. land, people, resources, commodities), of denying the constitutive relationship between material forms (things other than the self) and human meaning, and of rejecting the possibility of undergoing this experience of limitation. Bolle's reference to the words of Stephen Hawking resounds through Perkinson's argument: the discovery of a theory that accounts for the existence of the universe would allow us to "know the mind of God." What manner of human being might emerge from such a limitless mode of existence is anybody's guess. As David Chidester points out, the recent explosion of Internet religions, with their absence of material limitations, already resides within an arena of human meaning in which "anything . . . seems possible;" and there is something undeniably disquieting about a proliferation of religions that fabricate their own historical conditions and morphological forms, scoff at any pretext of sincerity, and obliterate the defining parameters of conventional personal and social identities.

Be that as it may, the compulsion toward control of matter during the modern era has transformed the material composition of the entire planet, such that for large numbers of the earth's population, the stuff of creation has come to assume a dramatically de-humanizing form. Being human in a human place has necessarily entailed a confrontation with limits that have rendered meaningful existence (and existence itself) precarious. This relationship, as well as the mode of religious work it has provoked, is typified by the economy of power generated by the colonial city, as David Carrasco points out in his essay concerning Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*. The city, from this perspective, is defined by the force of it own conception of its monumentality—its capacity to control matter (humans, resources, knowledge) by simultaneously excluding human beings from its cultural, political, and economic structures of valuation, and admitting them as exploitable resources. In the face of the de-humanization of the city, the exploited perforce negotiate meanings of being human that, while fully situated within the limits posed by forces other than themselves, do not surrender be-

neath the imposed stamp of exploitable brute matter. From the peripheral, or "anterior," vantage point of those excluded from the dominant center of cultural production, religious modes materialize that both provide an alternate understanding of the city's monumentality, and allow for meaningful habitation in a world in which the city is unavoidable. In the first instance, however, the experience of limit is one of profound collision. "City's a quake," writes Chamoiseau; "there all things are mean."[2]

The essays contained in this volume begin repeatedly with this sense of collision as immanently implicated in the nature of the modern world.[3] Philip Arnold, for instance, focuses our attention on the violent collision of Onandaga peoples with colonial American forces bent upon their destruction; Jim Perkinson writes of collision with the "skin borders" of racial constructions; and my own essay begins with the impact of two passenger airliners on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The sense of percussion looms large in these essays, in the wake of which modes of the human and the world emerge that are simultaneously imbedded in, and prior to, these stark experiences of limitation. The Mentoh, as David Carrasco points out, is a distinctive case in point: the pages of *Texaco* are pervaded by these spirit forces, who constitute creative resources for those enmeshed in the random violence of colonialism. For the Onondaga, locusts present themselves as a hierophany, whose humanly generative meaning is both incongruous with, and inextricably woven into, the experience of violence; hip hop, writes Perkinson, is a mode by which the body re-asserts its constitutive intimacy with its world—it is "the stiletto to the wall of the ghetto"; and the silence following the attacks on the World Trade Center presents itself as both a mirrored image of the forces that have sought unfettered control of matter in modernity, and a reservoir for alternate human modes lived in relation to tangible limitations.

In these essays, we explore two sides of a single modern coin. The culture that defies constraint—that aspires to "know the mind of God"—may well be at the threshold of confronting the dehumanizing impact of its own defiance. Meanwhile, those human beings who have undergone this culture's license to control matter have had no option but to collide with this limit. In religiously negotiating what it means to be human in a human place, their peripheral vision has served to provide alternate meanings of both the person, and the time and space we call modernity.

I and my fellow contributors wish to express our gratitude to the University of Maine at Farmington for its generous support of the 2002 Consultation on Religion and Modernity, which was the catalyst for this volume. We also thank Charles H. Long for his contributions to the consultation, for the ongoing and inimitable impetus he has provided for our conversations, and for his friendship. Finally, I must thank Mark McPherran, without whose assistance our consultations, this volume, and much more would have been arduous.

Notes

1 This succinct definition was suggested by David Chidester in the context of our initial discussions. The term "peripheral vision," although a common thread, was also David's turn of phrase.

2 Chamoiseau, Patrick. 1998. *Texaco*, translated by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. New York: Vintage Books, p.173.

3 The terms "collision" and "percussion" were descriptives employed by David Carrasco during our Farmington discussions, and I find them extremely appropriate in considering the common motifs contained in these essays.