

Faith as a First Principle in Charles McCoy's Theology and Ethics

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Charles McCoy's Christian theology and ethics are based in a covenantal understanding that provides a way for Christians to engage the many views in the modern university. McCoy's approach has both openness and commitment; it is akin to and supported by the fiduciary thought of Johannes Cocceius, H. R. Niebuhr, and Michael Polanyi. By seeing the way faith as trust operates in human beings, McCoy has laid foundations for Christian theology in a multicultural and pluralistic age. Most important is McCoy's argument that there are many theologies, even Christian theologies, and the life of Christian faith is always one of growth and of exploration.

As a doctoral student under Charles Sherwood McCoy, I now realize that it takes a life time to recognize debts to a great teacher. While I have prized being the first doctoral student to graduate under his supervision and to have had his influence in choosing and pursuing the thought of Michael Polanyi, it is only by reflection that I see how grand his teaching was. In 1960, when I went to Pacific School of Religion to study under McCoy, I went with great expectations of him. It had been reported that H. Richard Niebuhr had said of McCoy "that of all the doctoral students that I have taught, I would rather have him as a colleague more than any other."¹ Further, another Yale Divinity School faculty member, J. Edward Dirks, had said that Charles McCoy was instituting at Pacific School what would be the most outstanding graduate program in religion in higher education in America.² Looking across a continent to Berkeley, soon to become a revolutionary center in higher education, I was attracted to the curriculum that McCoy was building for his teaching program. At Pacific School, religion in higher education and campus ministry were being approached through studies of "Christianity and Contemporary Intellectual Movements" and the "Mission of the Church on Campus" taught by McCoy. In these core courses, it was clear that his approach was toward a rigorous theological grappling with the intellectual beliefs and behavior of the academic world. At a chaplain's conference at Yale University in 1957, I had noticed McCoy's aggressive intellectual acumen in an exchange with Julian Hartt, principal conference speaker.

What I found so important in Charles McCoy's teaching and writing is expressed in the title of this presentation "faith as a first principle." From understanding faith as a dynamic and integral foundation of Christian life to faith as a pivotal issue in Christian theology and ethics in their engagement with society, McCoy developed the primal roles of faith in our being as humans. I do not recall seeing it in McCoy's printed words, but it was a dictum that one should speak of "Christian faith" and not "the Christian faith." It was fundamental to McCoy's outlook since I first studied with him that faith is a condition of being human, that faith is integral to all human being, and one could not speak of "the Christian faith" as if it were monolithic and static. In one sense, McCoy early saw there are many Christian faiths, that faith is fluid with the flow of human being, and that Christians share with all humans this faith characteristic. Put another way, McCoy's theology while grounded in his own Christian commitment was already open to and aware of the pluralism, diversity and creativity that we have come to see in our time of multicultural emphasis.

Besides McCoy's sense of the primal nature of faith in our being human, McCoy was a pioneer in pursuing the ways of faith in the depth of our intellectual formulations and in our practical affairs. Three figures among McCoy's many writings early stood out as examples of his pursuit of the role of faith in life and in thought. One was

McCoy's study and use of the covenant theology of Johannes Cocceius that emphasized the personal fiduciary relation of God and humans in contrast to the formalism of orthodox Calvinism. Another was McCoy's study and use of H. Richard Niebuhr's relational and radical monotheistic thinking. The third was McCoy's attention to Michael Polanyi's fiduciary epistemology, who at that time had no doctoral students and few theologians searching his books. What all of these major thinkers have in common in their work is a deep grasp of the way we are persons of faith, and their grasp is one that takes us to central issues of commitment.

When speaking about the nature of faith within McCoy's theology, as in most Protestant theology, it is important to note that faith is not a supernatural act of God in the soul. Faith, in part, is an act of human being, though invited by the ground of all being and truth that Christians name as God. Faith is premise and disposition, network of background and community understandings and readiness to trust and to follow. McCoy's sense of the nature of faith that is being developed in his thought is akin to the *willingness* of the scientist to accept atoms as true just as much as it is akin to a Christian's acceptance of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed McCoy follows in the Reformation teaching of justification by faith alone where the chief moment of faith is *fiducia*, trust, a supremely personal and involving confidence in the grace of God. When turning to the scientific disciplines, their faith is found to have a comparable structure.³ This notion of faith fits Polanyi's comparison of his fiduciary principle in knowing as being like the "Pauline scheme" of redemption.

As a theologian called to address the religious situation in higher education, McCoy's approach was appropriate to dealing with any discipline or dimension because it sprung from his dealing with the nature of faith as a first principle of human being. How he understood faith and how he applied it to the range of issues of our century would unfold in a career that moved to development of a center for ethics and public policy, centers for business ethics as well as explorations in the arts and in historical theology.

This comprehensive range of able theological writing and teaching is partly explained by what I am calling McCoy's first principle, his understanding of faith. To show this fecund understanding, I want to examine what I regard as a McCoy *tour de force* and a prologomena to a life of advancing our understanding of faith.

In 1964, the Faculty Christian Fellowship, a national ecumenical organization of Christian scholars, associated with the National Council of Churches and the national Student Christian Federation, and also the sponsor of the journal, *The Christian Scholar* which later became *Soundings*, began publishing a series on "Faith and Learning: Examining the Academic Disciplines." For this series, McCoy wrote "The Meaning of Theological Reflection."⁴ In this essay, McCoy set forth an approach rooted in his understanding of faith that remains a viable way for theology today and in the future. As we will see, the essay shows his roots in Cocceius' covenant theology, H. R. Niebuhr, and Michael Polanyi, but it distinctively challenges all humans, premodern, modern, and postmodern to examine and to discover the character and meaning of faith. Four concerns structure McCoy's discussion in this essay: 1) the implications of reflection in faith, 2) the meaning of theology, 3) misunderstandings which impede conversation in the academic community, and 4) the role of theology in the university's conversation.⁵ What will emerge is the sense in which McCoy's early approach through his focus on faith as a first principle is why his theology is intrinsically post-critical.

Implications of Reflection in Faith

McCoy begins by acknowledging his own standpoint in Christian faith. From that standpoint, McCoy sees in the world "an organic wholeness and covenantal faithfulness." This world's coherence are grounded, not in human

imagination, but in God known through trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and particularly in Jesus Christ. Then in a very subsidiary and focal awareness like formulation, McCoy says: “As trust and as standpoint our faith opens us to the possibility of knowledge and provides spacious dimensions for investigation.”⁶ He does not say just “standpoint” but “as trust and as standpoint” which combines the indwelling, the commitment, and the attending to of knowing and of exploring emerging in Polanyi’s thought. Further, McCoy immediately recognizes that there are other “trusts and standpoints” with different commitments. He claims that all persons have this character as he says “All who profess knowledge have a foundation of basic trust and presuppose some conception of reality which shapes their investigations and molds their conclusions.”⁷ Significantly, McCoy in the description of faith emphasizes “trust” which is the active and personal commitment of the self. He clearly does not limit or reduce faith to a set of intellectual propositions.

“Trusts and standpoints” is definitely akin to the structure of tacit knowing though not derived directly from it. In this formulation, the person is the pivot around and through which trust and standpoint occur. In the classical sense of *fides qua creditur*, the faith by which one believes, and *fides quae creditur*, the faith which is believed, McCoy’s approach sees them as together. Just as Polanyi could not see explicit knowledge without the fiduciary elements seen in subsidiary awareness, McCoy cannot see Christian standpoint or any standpoint apart from the personal acts of trust. What also stands out seen from our present perspective is that McCoy fashions his theological outlook in a post-critical way without making any argument for the post-critical itself. What this ease in approach suggests is that what we now call “post-critical” was already developed in McCoy’s thinking as he worked in the field of theology and that what Polanyi offered was support and further elaboration of this approach.

In concise terms, McCoy describes the Christian standpoint that he holds and that he sees Christians share.⁸ One feature is a belief in a unity that “underlies and permeates the variety of our experience, that meaning and purpose are present within the perplexities of history.” This unity is grounded in God who is hidden and revealed. Jesus Christ is the divine logos become flesh, and logos is understood not as logical reason but the divine ordering that is mysterious yet self-disclosing. Most important is that in the divine logos, God has not only created the world but has also promised faithfulness to humankind. It is from our faith in God’s covenanting with us that we can believe that in our experience we are confronted with “a dependable reality.” The natural and moral order of the world are dependent upon this God who is faithful and the “Power beyond the powers of nature and history.” It is in this “context” as McCoy calls it, that Christians see the possibility of knowledge yet deny the finality of their and other’s conceptualizations of truth.

The term “context” here bears comment because it again underlines McCoy’s sense of faith and knowing as embodied not only in person and community but also culture, society, and history. The beliefs Christians and others hold always function out of the background of assumptions that they have lived and used. Trust and standpoint cannot be detached from the layers and communities of our existence.

Also, McCoy’s rejection of a finality in Christian or other conceptualizations of truth emphasizes the venture and risk in our trust and standpoint. We are so involved in our knowing that faith cannot be a seizure or capturing of truth. Our faith as Christians or as any other belief system is finite seeking the infinite. Trust and standpoint become a following always subject to revision and to correction.

It is at this point of the complementary relation between commitment and openness in the nature of Christian faith in “the vision of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer which the event of Jesus Christ gives us” that McCoy introduces Michael Polanyi.⁹ McCoy describes the way the British physical chemist turned philosopher sees “the fiduciary element in rigorous thought.” McCoy points to Polanyi’s two types of authority, general and specific, the

first providing a framework of inquiry and the second dictating conclusions. McCoy also introduces Polanyi's criticism of the ideal of detached knowledge and the concept of tacit knowing. These insights from Polanyi help to show that "to arguments that this commitment closes us to reality we can only reply by showing the spacious dimensions of truth to which it does indeed open us and by suggesting that other commitments, e.g. logical positivism, enclose one within a much narrower reality."¹⁰

As a theologian then, McCoy sees this understanding of faith as setting out the possibility of engagement and of discovery with all seekers of truth. Reflection in faith is dialogical, from faith to faith, and for him such dialogue begins in a context of Christian belief in the Incarnation that means minimally four things: 1) that the entire universe is sacred by its Creation in Jesus Christ and worthy of rigorous study, 2) that Christian scholars are called to think sacramentally into this Logos which nature and history reveal and conceal, 3) in all authentic pursuit of truth we are responding to the call of God, and 4) a Christian scholar stands in finitude between the truth that forms the basis of his/her thought and the truth to which he/she moves, the truth that is the fullness of God.¹¹

Here McCoy is writing in the early 1960's, a time when campus ministry was vigorous and reasonably funded. He speaks to the role of the professional campus minister and to the lay Christian in an open and inquiring university. He has tried to show how a person can be both committed and open and how this stance is at one with all persons. Scholars across the country and students working with him felt inspired and equipped to carry on this discussion in the academy as rightful members of a community of inquiry, of faith and of learning.

The Meaning of Theology

From this faith component in all human knowing and being, McCoy went on to show that theology is a normal and helpful consequence of this condition. But theology, as McCoy sees it, is not confined to reason explicating the contents of Christian belief. Theology arises first from our being creatures of faith. The origins and deeper meaning of theology is in the exploration of ultimate commitments whether Christian or of some other persuasion.

The grounds for this understanding McCoy finds in the uses made of the term by Plato, Aristotle and Clement of Alexandria in the ancient world and in Michael B. Foster, Kierkegaard, Wilhelm Dilthey, R. G. Collingwood, T. E. Hulme, Karl Mannheim, and H. Richard Niebuhr in the modern world.¹² The essence of this understanding of theology is that theology is the exploration of "absolute presuppositions" and the clarification of "conceptualizations based on revelatory experiences."¹³ It is important to notice that McCoy's definition of theology includes two contrasting and opposing notions. From its Greek origins, theology is like first philosophy, the examination of the most basic assumptions of reality. From its biblical origins, theology is not philosophical reasoning but recital or story of those illuminating and integrating moments that hold us yet cannot be fully put into words.

McCoy's conception suggests that all persons can and should do theology whether they are Christians, positivists, or atheists. For him, the study of theology is a way of knowing developed out of Greek philosophical and biblical roots that pertains to all human endeavor. From Plato, Aristotle and Clement come the sense of theology as investigating ultimate understanding of reality, metaphysics, or first philosophy except that Clement adds the biblical view of God's ineffable mystery. This addition by Clement creates the essential tension within theology of dealing with both the rational and revelatory components of human commitments and conceptualizations of reality. McCoy states this universal applicability of theology as rational examination of ultimate beliefs coupled with the ineffable mystery of the ultimate in the following way:

This tension not only illumines the grounding in revelation of Christian theology. Turned back upon

theological reflection, it suggests that no ultimate conception of reality is intellectually self-validating, but always rests upon postulates and convictions which are not self-evident. At the foundation of every total view of the world, there is a point analogous to that of God's revelation for Christians upon which the whole rests.¹⁴

McCoy calls this human condition the "theological predicament." While "Christian thought...rests ultimately on faith, so also it may be demonstrated that the views of others rest upon convictions beyond demonstration in terms of reason and experience."¹⁵

It is helpful here to notice McCoy's broad understanding of revelation. In saying that all persons participate in the theological predicament, McCoy notices that everyone has their equivalent of Christian revelation in their ultimate presuppositions and commitments. Having faith in the value and validity of a comprehensive standpoint or absolute presupposition means being grasped by something beyond verification. Here we notice another view akin to Michael Polanyi's observation that we cannot both live and think within our commitments and at the same time examine them. In Polanyian terms, ultimate commitments or absolute presuppositions that guide us in discovery and finding of new knowledge are frameworks that we indwell for attending to a problem.

So far then, we have seen in McCoy's thought how faith is characteristic of human being and how this faith character presents all humans with the challenge of doing theology as a way of self-understanding of their commitments. Also, this attempt at self-understanding cannot be fulfilled by rational analysis alone because it is bound with our own trusts upon which we depend so personally that they cannot be fully explicated, only recognized. In a sense, it would be appropriate to quote Polanyi, "we know more than we can tell." McCoy, however, realizes that his view of theology is contrary to a number of contemporary views leading him to point out their "misunderstanding of theology."

Misunderstandings of Theology Impeding Academic Conversation

Today, perhaps more than in the 1960's, theology has receded from the public forum. Theological inquiry is even unlikely in most of the American Academy of Religion. What McCoy saw in misunderstandings of theology may help to explain this retreat and isolation.

Here McCoy's discussion is intense and polemical taking on major theological figures of the last two centuries. Limited by our time, we can only indicate McCoy's critique. It begins by noticing that in American higher education, excepting schools with continuing strong religious foundations such as Roman Catholic and fundamentalist, theology has been absent from the curriculum. This absence has arisen partly from the understanding among academics that theology is obscurantist, imperialistic, shoddy and uncritical, not worthy of academic status along with other disciplines. There is hope, McCoy thinks, that this view of theology is changing, but he cautions that we have to look at "the fault of theologians in the isolation and misunderstanding of theology."¹⁶

One general error of theologies in the last two centuries is the attempt to define a universal framework or condition and then to demonstrate how Christianity meets this condition better than any other standpoint or world view.¹⁷ Rationalism in the eighteenth century tried to show that the validity of Christian faith could be proven by rational means. Schleiermacher later tried to build a philosophy of religion of the religious consciousness and to show how Christian faith is superior in articulating human religious consciousness. Ritschl saw in humans the capacity to

value which is absent in nature and then saw in the Kingdom of God the way of fulfilling human's ethical nature. Even existentialism in its contemporary form is used to analyze the human predicament to which Christianity is the answer.

What McCoy then asserts reminds one of Polanyi's notable confession of limitations in the preface to *Personal Knowledge*, "All affirmations published in this book are my own personal commitments; they claim this, and no more than this for themselves." McCoy says:

Only by accepting and confessing this situation of particularity can the theologian be true to his task....if we are to relate theology to contemporary intellectual movements, then we must accept the theological stance of confessed commitments as our starting point, not seeking escape into a supposed universal point of reference.¹⁸

Despite this sharp critique of modern liberal theology, McCoy does express gratitude for the interest in new intellectual currents in theology which have taught us much.

Besides the error of trying to establish a universal standpoint of which Christian faith is the highest form, McCoy also criticizes those who have tried to limit theology to Christian faith.¹⁹ He notes two general consequences of this view: 1) theology is unrelated to metaphysics and first philosophy, and 2) Christian theology is the only theology. This limited vision of theology has had the value of countering the universalizing approach mentioned above, but it distorts the understanding of faith and the theological predicament. Among those who have segregated theology from philosophy are Gustaf Aulen and Hendrik Kraemer. Karl Barth, McCoy points out, "states the matter more carefully" by acknowledging that he knows that natural theology does exist but says that he cannot understand "how it is possible for it to exist." Barth also says that the knowledge of God attained by human reason is philosophical speculation, not God. McCoy questions whether Barth has confused metaphysics and natural theology and then goes on to suggest that this position at least has the merit of showing the possibility of conversation between Christians and other ways of thought.²⁰ Like Barth, Hendrik Kraemer separates theology from philosophy of religion and science of religion yet Kraemer saw in such efforts a "disguised theology" suggesting that exposing and examining such presuppositions and commitments could be a part of theological reflection.

The second misunderstanding of making theology too exclusively Christian is seen in those who claim that only Christian revelation provides the ground for theology. Besides being seen in Schleiermacher, Barth, Kraemer and others, but not in H. Richard Niebuhr, McCoy also finds it in Tillich. Tillich despite his interest in and openness to other religions claims that in the Logos become flesh, "Christian theology has a foundation which infinitely transcends the foundations of everything in the history of religion which could be called 'theology.'"²¹ Sir Walter Moberly, major spokesperson for "the university question" in Great Britain, takes the same stance in his description of theology as "the study of the self-revelation of the living God" and as done in the Christian community only by a committed person.²² This way of thinking leads to the mistaken separation of the church as a community of faith and the university as a community of learning. McCoy asks, "Is it true that no other community has 'faith' except the Christian church?" No wonder then that many would dismiss the church as a place of subjective thought and assign to the university the task of objective study. Such formulations by able theologians have unwittingly supported the false ideal of knowledge as objective, without presuppositions, and detached from the person by suggesting that theology is based upon a subjective condition not open to others.

The Role of Theology in the University's Conversation

The challenge of theology in the university is to hold in tension the two themes developed above. On the one hand, theology is to search for and examine those presuppositions on which “all academic discipline and intellectual system rest.” On the other hand, theology is to acknowledge that there is a commitment beyond these presuppositions that defies our rational analysis and arises from that which grasps our heart. Here McCoy writes:

This dual meaning also illumines our meeting with persons in the university. We may meet them on apparently intellectual ground as we discuss ideas, compare ideologies. Beyond this, however, we seek to understand them as persons in the trust and loyalties by which they live.²³

This conversation cannot convert or produce faith, but it will clarify, enlarge, and open up the “the situation of real choice.”

The Post-Critical and McCoy's Idea of Theology

From the review of McCoy's essay on “Theological Reflection,” it is clear that his understanding of faith leads to a major epistemological emphasis. Faith as trust and as standpoint are basic to our knowing. Put another way, McCoy by making faith a first principle of doing any kind of theology demands an acknowledgement by the theologian, Christian or non-Christian - reflective believer or non-reflective believer, that they consider the trusts and standpoints that underlie their outlook. Further, this call for awareness of the prior trusts and the prior revelatory like phenomena that shape each person's standpoint is a call to start with one's own personal story rather than a preformed list of topics, issues, or doctrines. There is no theistic question, no Christological question, no ontological question, no eschatological question, no soteriological question, or other traditional question that determines the content. The question seems to be “Where are you coming from when you make claims about ultimate reality?” Such a way allows the person to both examine their own experience and to place themselves among the options that are alive, which may include the agnostic, the atheistic, or anti-metaphysical.

While this approach looks very open in principle, it may also be “logocentric” or biased toward the Western tradition of philosophy and of theology. To engage in the examination of first principles and of valued beliefs is the skill of those trained in such things. One can see how such a process would be possible and helpful to persons with theological and philosophical training. The person trained in physical or biological science may find such an inquiry difficult and probably uninteresting. As their standpoint is one that excludes the value of metaphysical inquiry, they will likely avoid or dismiss such a conversation. If they were postmodernist, they would see this conversation as weighted toward the established tradition and with little to gain.

Another way of considering this issue of defining theology as inquiry into our trusts and standpoints is to take McCoy's criticism of those who have tried to base theology upon some universal condition of human nature and experience. By building upon the premise that all humans are persons of faith, McCoy seems to have set up a universal condition to which his notion of theology is the answer. Theology is a way of self-understanding for all humans. However, McCoy does not fall into the same trap that the other Christian theologies did. The reason is that his notion of faith and of theology is open in terms of its content. Like Polanyi and the polarity of personal commitment and universal intent toward the truth, McCoy sees all of us as living by trust and standpoint, but those positions are our own. These positions may lead to standpoints that radically differ from others. There is no requirement in this thinking

process that we arrive at a common point, a universal truth. McCoy's faith principle, like Polanyi and H. Richard Niebuhr, does not have to arrive at a defined truth.

Still that position seems open to question, too. Behind this movement from faith as trust and standpoint to self-critical reflection upon our personal commitments and beliefs lies another tendency. There is an assumption that in looking for our basic presuppositions and loyalties, we will find our god or gods. It seems that there is a requirement for all humans that they have some "center of value" or loyalty. McCoy points out the later Barth's overcoming the limiting of theology to Christian revelation by quoting from Barth's *Evangelical Theology*:

But many things can be meant by the word "God." For this, reason there are many kinds of theologies. There is no man who does not have his own god or gods as the object of his highest desire and trust, or as the basis of his deepest loyalty and commitment. There is no one who is not to this extent also a theologian. There is, moreover, no religion, no philosophy, no world view that is not dedicated to some such divinity.²⁴

McCoy and Barth seem to share the same assumption which looks like a universal condition for all humans. But again, if one reads carefully, McCoy's statement is consistent as an expression of his own theology and leaves open the alternatives that could be expressed by contrary views. In thinking this way, McCoy is somewhat like Karl Barth's saying that he knows there is such a thing as natural theology yet he does not understand how it is possible for it to exist. Clearly there is a difference between saying that from my standpoint it seems that all persons have a center of value or god and saying that all persons must admit that they have an ultimate belief, god, or gods.

Logically and intentionally, McCoy's development of faith as a first principle is compelling. It is supported by the work of Polanyi and H. Richard Niebuhr. It fits the common outlook of our late twentieth century pluralism. The course of theology since the 1960's, however, raises a question. Looking back to the place of theology in the academic world, we do not see the rich discussion and creative development among scholars that was envisioned. The very idea of a national organization called "The Faculty Christian Fellowship" or a serious intellectual journal called "The Christian Scholar" seems quaint at best and fundamentalist and pietistic at worst. The theological renaissance within the academic world did not happen. The major voices of the Niebuhrs, Tillich, and Barth are nearly historical fossils. Many of those inspired to go into the academic world trained in theology are doing ethics, literature, philosophy, sociology and other studies where "theological reflection" is non-existent.

To what extent then does this deterioration in theological reflection follow from McCoy's standpoint and those who have shared a similar vocation? As already suggested, McCoy and those like him may have expected too much intellectually of the academic world. At Manchester University and later at Oxford, Polanyi was reported as notorious for turning social occasions into discussions of basic beliefs. Theologians following McCoy and Polanyi find themselves in the somewhat awkward position that their concern for basic faith commitments is not a common concern. Ethics has become the more common area of reflection in the academic forum, and theology seems left to the clergy and the seminary. Such a statement, however, is not effective in criticizing McCoy's understanding of theology because McCoy does not separate theology and ethics. A view of theology as only a discussion of systematic and coherent beliefs within a faith misses the thrust of McCoy's first principle. For McCoy, theology is always about trust as well as standpoint, or about our action as well as our conceptions. This implication of faith's determinative force in theological reflection is seen in McCoy's major book, *When Gods Change, Hope For Theology*.²⁵

Hope For Theology

Understanding McCoy's first principle will show both how theology is not as dead as suggested above and how theology is not separated from ethics. Looking at the changing of the gods in our time, McCoy sees hope because he sees a new pattern. Rather than focusing on particular standpoints or isolated types of view, McCoy emphasizes the wholeness of human experience. There is a fundamental relation of the person to the encompassing gift of the whole of experience that is our world. As God gave the world including us, there is a response of trust by our very primal receiving and dependence upon this world. As we rely upon this world and networks of communities to live and to work, we also again trust. Networks, loyalties, and faith from nature to human being are covenants, relationships of trust. So when McCoy is talking about theology as reflection upon the commitments of the self, he is talking about the actions, alliances, routines, habits and programs of everyone. McCoy's insight is that we can find our theology in the examination of this life of faith.²⁶

Looking at the late twentieth century's theological situation, McCoy finds transformation and opportunity occurring because he sees global theological change in pluralism and in liberation.²⁷ He clearly outlines the collapse of the Constantinian paradigm in theology with its insular confidence in its absolute truth and its imperialistic attitude toward other views. He also reminds us that "unbelievers also believe."²⁸ In this new world of competing outlooks, McCoy sees that "The covenant God of historical promise and fulfillment is revealed in the changing patterns of human belief."²⁹ Rather than a sense of loss, McCoy has a sense of hope that in new patterns of human response theology will widen and deepen as it takes seriously that God is active in all experience.

In my view, McCoy's development of faith as first principle enables him and others in theology to engage knowledgeably with the complex struggles for life, peace and justice in our time. It does the very crucial task of helping one to understand their own place, "location" as McCoy now calls it, and to engage all persons beyond linguistic skirmishes and battles about theological terms. What I know as a theologian sharing the same tradition of faith as McCoy is that when I am talking, negotiating, and deciding about the arrangements of human affairs, particularly in politics, medicine, higher education as well as in church and in family, I am always engaged in the activities of faith. The organizations, the affiliations, the networks, the webs that form the patterns of a life are covenantal. These relationships begin in trust and in hope. We are joined with all humans in this venture of building the trusts that enable us to live and to advance human well being. McCoy opens, keeps open, and leads us into risks and rewards of a life of faith either as theologian or as a responsible human being.

The narrowness of the popular, and often the academic notions of theology, have cut off the dialogue, but McCoy's broader view has also shown us how to be in the conversation even if we are not at the center, a goal of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's dying thoughts. Much good has been done by biblical studies such as the quest for the historical Jesus and the Jesus seminar. Much help in understanding what Christians believe has come from looking at the relations of postmodern physics to Christian beliefs. The truth of Christian faith is still intelligible and coherent enough to seem true to its followers. Those achievements can only be shared where all have "common ground" as Polanyi called it in talking about the relation of science and of religion.³⁰ McCoy like Polanyi has shown this common ground.

Polanyi's Post-Critical Thought

As suggested earlier, McCoy was post-critical before Polanyi's philosophy developed this classification for fiduciary thinking. But McCoy has seen in Polanyi much more than most theologians in leading positions. T. F. Torrance has made much of how Polanyi's epistemology allows us to see the way the relations of space, time and

incarnation can be seen together.³¹

McCoy seems to share with Torrance the belief that theology and natural science are “at work in the same world seeking understanding within the rational connections and regularities of space and time where they pursue their respective inquiries and let their thinking serve the reality into which they inquire.”³² They also diverge in their goals. Torrance wants to show how scientific theology can be while McCoy wants to show how Christian theology can be itself and be open as well, have dialogue with other views and can benefit Christian understanding by helping it to grow and to discover greater views of God’s work in the world.

During the Polanyi centennial celebrations of 1991, McCoy delivered two addresses that showed his way of seeing faith as an ever changing growth in understanding our basic beliefs and standpoints. In one address, McCoy outlined ways in which Polanyi’s revolutionary post-critical perspective challenges our approaches to education.³³ McCoy spoke of six ways that Polanyi’s tacit knowing asks education to reorient itself by recognizing: 1) how the tacit dimension makes possible learning itself, 2) how genuine learning is discovery itself developing our power to indwell and to breakout, 3) how the heuristic drive is inborn in humans, 4) how learning is a convivial or communal, not individualistic process, 5) how the structure of education is like the structure of tacit knowing, and 6) and how discovery/learning is life long and a function of the whole human community. Here we see again how McCoy’s understanding of theological reflection makes it possible to see the faith principle at work but without having to explicitly name it’s relevance to education.

In the second address, he uses Polanyi’s epistemology to address the current role of ethics.³⁴ Again McCoy finds six important challenges: 1) the peril of moral perfectionism and forcing ethical ideals on others, 2) the failure of “dilemma ethics” to recognize the tacit coefficients that underlie the debate and provide the background for it, 3) the danger in moralism’s absolutizing its own moral norms because it does not recognize the tacit ground of their human location, 4) the exposure of the weakness of ethical rationalism’s trying to have a universal reason by ignoring the tacit cultural and historical components of all human reason, 5) the communal nature of virtue rather than the often held view that virtue is only an individual achievement, and 6) the sense of permanent revolution and liberation in all human endeavors, including ethics, because of the from/to structure of knowing.

In these two addresses and throughout McCoy’s writings, it is clear that McCoy brings together the insights of Cocceius and H. R. Niebuhr. We live by faith as trust in the world given to us, the world understood by Cocceius as God’s covenantal gift. Our faith is an indwelling and a breaking out, a reliance upon in order to attend to the continued giving of creation and our being to us. Our response to this world is ever challenged to renew itself in the unfolding of life with our human companions. Niebuhr’s sense of this life as permanent revolution is found in Polanyi’s belief in humanity as a society of explorers. As faith is the first principle of McCoy’s theology, we can also see that it is the keystone of Polanyi’s thought and post-critical theology.

Endnotes

¹ Harland Hogue, Professor of Homiletics, Pacific School of Religion, on faculty at time McCoy was recruited for the new position sponsored by the Danforth Foundation.

² Personal correspondence to Richard Gelwick, January, 1960.

³ Cf. “Faith,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F. L. Cross (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 499-500.

- 4 Faculty Christian Fellowship, 475 Riverside Dr., New York: New York, 24 pages.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 7 *Ibidem.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 10 *Ibidem.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-14.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 15 *Ibidem.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp.15-18.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 20. McCoy's reference is to *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 1951, pp. 15, 18.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
25. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
28. *Ibid.*, pp, 33, 37.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

30. "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions of Common Ground," *Philosophy Today*, 7 (Spring, 1963), pp. 4-14.
31. *Space, Time and Incarnation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.
32. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
33. "From Ptolemy to Copernicus to Polanyi: Post-critical Perspectives For Epistemology and Education," *From Polanyi To The 21st Century: Proceedings Of A Centennial Conference, Kent State University, April 11-13, 1991*, pp. 307-316.
- 34 "The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives For Ethics," *Tradition and Discovery*, XVIII, (Number 2, 1991-92), pp. 33-39.

Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

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