

A Response to the Essays On My Thought

Charles S. McCoy

ABSTRACT Key Words: Thought of Charles S. McCoy; faith principle; covenantal or federal paradigm; post-critical perspective; Michael Polanyi; H. Richard Niebuhr; Plato

This brief essay comments on the several preceding essays analyzing Charles S. McCoy's thought.

I am grateful to the Polanyi Society for honoring me with the session Nov. 21, 1997, on my thought and to the authors of the papers that provided the focus of the discussion. It pleased me especially that they drew on a wide spectrum of my writing and my activities.

1. Perspective Within Christian Faith

Richard Gelwick rightly points to what he call the “faith principle” at the core of my life and thought and to my location within the Christian community of faith. For myself, faith means trusting in and seeking to be loyal to the triune God understood through Jesus Christ, the Bible, the Christian tradition , and the wider experience of the human community. Christian faith in this sense must retain its focus on believing and relying rather than being reduced to rigid biblicism, creedalism, ecclesiasticism, and moralism.

When faith is understood as human believing, trusting, and acting within a context of great mystery and varied understandings of that mystery, this faith principle becomes a way to recognize that all humans live by faith, the strong meaning of faith as believed-in reality. We can then be clearer about faith as shaped within the Christian community of interpretation and also have a point of departure for identifying, understanding, and relating to the diverse communities of interpretation among academics, in the organizations of society, and in organized religion.

Faith informs also the continuous valuing that is woven into human reflection and action, thereby providing the basis of ethics and morality. As in other communities of interpretation, Christian faith shapes the criteria for action, for evaluating change, and for giving meaning to love, justice, and liberation.

2. The Covenantal or Federal Paradigm

Phil Rolnick emphasizes the importance of the covenant in my theology and ethics as well as in my continuing involvement in social action and change. The notion of covenant shapes my understanding of God, the natural world, history, human nature, and community. By means of covenant, the relational dimensions of faith, value, and action are brought more clearly into view. Humans believe and trust in relation to others in community and to what is relied upon as real. Valuing means being good for selves and other beings in relation to a center of value. Action takes place in a communal context of interacting persons, values, commitments, and loyalties. In the federal tradition of the Christian community, the unfolding of the covenant of God provides a way to understand the development of the world from creation to consummation.

Rolnick speaks of the covenant as almost “metaphysical” for me. This would be correct except, first, for

the connotations metaphysics has acquired in Western thought. My view does have kinship with what Aristotle is seeking in his treatise on First Philosophy, especially as interpreted by R. G. Collingwood, but not with the misunderstanding of Aristotle's intent because of the location of the work after the treatise on Physics in the Aristotelian corpus and, as a result, misinterpreting the meaning of metaphysics as "beyond the physical." Second, the conviction that covenant provides the most comprehensive root metaphor for viewing the world derives for me more from communal heritage than from rationality conceived as operating somehow above and beyond the context of community, as many who are engaged in what they call metaphysics seem to assume.

3. Primary Influences

Phil Mullins deals helpfully with the main influences shaping my thought. To Plato, federal theology, Michael Polanyi, and H. Richard Niebuhr, I would add the Bible, within the perspective noted above. With reference to Plato, Mullins is correct that I understand the dialogues not as purveying a form of absolute idealism, a common misunderstanding arising from taking the criticisms of Aristotle as aimed at Plato rather than from a careful reading of the dialogues themselves. The dialogue form, as Mullins notes, is not merely a literary device but is central to Plato's method, with implicit covenants suggested and tacit dimensions presupposed, providing the basis for breaking out toward new insights. This reading not only offers, in my view, a more accurate way to understand Plato but also suggests ways to connect his thought with that of Polanyi, Niebuhr, and federalism.

Mullins is also on target in noting the strong and pervasive influence of H. Richard Niebuhr throughout my work and the ways in which I extend Niebuhr's thought. By background and practice, I am more of a social activist than was Niebuhr, a characteristic about which he often chided me in a friendly manner. That difference, however, does not alter my continuing dependence on much of his overall approach to theology and ethics.

At no point is my modification of Niebuhr more important than in my discovery and use of federal theology and its close relation to the rise of federal political philosophy and practice. The virtual elimination of post-Reformation thought from most histories of theology has left contemporary religious and political scholarship ignorant of important movements related to the development of modern society, and unaware especially of federalism, which provides the most pervasive and growing political pattern of the twentieth century and one of the most powerful moral philosophies actually operative within Western social institutions. Federalism also fits well within the plurality of faiths implied in Niebuhr's confessional interpretation of Christian faith.

4. The Post-Critical Perspective

Even before my study with Niebuhr, I was reaching for what I would learn from Michael Polanyi to call "post-critical." Niebuhr nurtured this direction, so that reading *Personal Knowledge* was not so much an adventure in a strange land as a time of liberating illumination of a homeland in which I was already dwelling. All the authors emphasize the post-critical character of all my work. They have described it well.

Doug Adams, in his inimitable fashion, points out the importance of art for my thought, as well as the artistic and playful elements in all that I do. For this, I am indebted to my family, to Niebuhr and Polanyi, and to my wife Margie.

If there is any label that fits me, I suppose "post-critical Christian federalist" would be it, and that may offer the most appropriate comment with which to conclude this response.

Notes on Contributors

Doug Adams is Professor of Christianity and the Arts at Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union (1798 Scenic, Berkeley, CA 94709) where he was a colleague of Charles S. McCoy for almost 20 years. Among his many publications, *Transcendence With the Human Body In Art (1991)*, recently reviewed in *TAD* (24:2 [1996-97]: 37-39), Adams regards as his most directly Polanyi- influenced scholarship.

Richard Gelwick has for many years been the General Coordinator for the Polanyi Society. He is the author of many articles on Polanyi as well as *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi (1977)*. As a graduate student working with Charles S. McCoy, Gelwick wrote the first dissertation on Michael Polanyi's non scientific thought. Gelwick retires at the end of the Spring 1998 term from his position as medical humanist at the School of Osteopathic Medicine at the University of New England (11 Hills Beach Road, Bitteford, ME 04005; e-mail: rprogel@juno.com).

Phil Mullins has been the editor of *TAD* since 1991 and is author of a number of articles on Polanyi published in a variety of journals; he teaches in an interdisciplinary humanities program at Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, Missouri 64507 (e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu). In the mid seventies under Charles McCoy's direction , he wrote a dissertation on hermeneutical and aesthetic applications of Polanyi's thought and later worked with McCoy at the Center for Ethics and Social Policy.

Charles S. McCoy, Professor Emeritus at Pacific School of Religion/Graduate Theological Union (1798 Scenic, Berkeley, CA 94709), is the author of many books and articles, including several in *TAD*, which make use of Michael Polanyi's thought. McCoy's long professional career has been not only that of a scholar but also that of an activist and a teacher. He introduced generations of graduate students in Berkeley to Polanyi's thought; this issue of *TAD* explores McCoy's own innovative ideas.

Philip A Rolnick is Associate Professor of theology and ethics at Greensboro College where he is also director of the Ethics Across the Curriculum program and general editor of Greensboro College's forthcoming book on ethics. Rolnick earned his Ph. D. in 1989 from Duke University where he worked with Thomas Langford after being introduced to Michael Polanyi's thought in his M.A. with Charles McCoy at Pacific School of Religion/Graduate Theological Union. Rolnick is the author of *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God* (1993)

Polanyi Society Membership

Tradition and Discovery is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally three issues of *TAD* each year.

The regular annual membership rate for the Polanyi Society is \$20; the student rate is \$10. The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Humanities, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507. Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the following information: subscriber's name as it appears on the card, the card name, and the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be mailed, faxed or e-mailed to Mullins (fax: USA 816-271-5987; e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu).

New members should provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), institutional relationship, and e-mail address and/or fax number (if available). Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing. The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and /or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following : (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi" which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi.

Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 E-MAIL: apczynski@sbu.edu PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.