

# Polanyi's Role in Poteat's Teaching Cultural Conceptual Analysis: 1967-1976

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**ABSTRACT Key Words:** William H. Poteat, Michael Polanyi, cultural conceptual analysis, modernity, teaching. *The influence of Michael Polanyi on William H. Poteat's teaching from 1967 to 1976 was apparent but not paramount. Cultural conceptual analysis as taught and practiced by Poteat during this period included Polanyian texts, themes, and concepts, but drew extensively from other major conceptual innovators who provided radical alternatives to key cultural conceptual commitments of modernity. This was the period roughly between the completion of *Intellect and Hope* and the writing of *Polanyian Meditations*.*

For my contribution to this discussion, I thought that, for those who knew Poteat's thought only through his books if they knew his work at all, it would be most helpful for me to address the influence of Polanyi on Poteat's teaching.

Teaching was Bill Poteat's calling. It fundamentally shaped his thinking, writing, and unique way of being-in-the world. See the examples in his writings, acknowledgements, and dedications for confirmation of this. And Bill's teaching certainly shaped those of us who had the privilege of studying with him.

I picked the period of nine years from the fall of 1967 to early 1976 when I was around him (as a divinity student, doctoral student, teaching assistant, dissertation advisee, and beginning teacher in a Religion Department which he came to chair during that period). Others on the panel were there for at least part of that time, and I hoped my recollections would generate some helpful comparisons with the experiences of others in order to clarify what Polanyi had to do with Poteat's teaching.

This was the time between the editing of *Intellect and Hope (IH)*, 1968. Bill had just put *IH* to bed, having undoubtedly burned much midnight oil going over every word of that important volume in Polanyi studies) and the beginnings of *Polanyian Meditations (PM)*, 1985). He tells us in the introduction to that major Polanyian work that *PM* burst forth in a graduate seminar in the Spring of 1976 when he promised to write a five page handout so that he could get the students to stop taking notes:

To deflect the seminar's attention from note-taking in order that instead the expectant faces of its members might be allowed to work their maieutic magic upon my only half-formed and emerging thought, I promised to commit to writing for future distribution what I felt I was about to say. A few days later I sat down to write the promised handout, beginning with a passage from page 160 of *Personal Knowledge*, supposing it would run to perhaps five legal-size mimeograph sheets. Three months and twenty-four thousand words later I had long since forgotten the handout and was well underway in the writing of *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (8).

While one could reasonably expect from *IH*, *PM*, and his later writings that Polanyi would have been the dominant influence on Bill's teaching, it is my argument that Bill was NOT primarily "teaching Polanyi" nor

was he primarily “teaching from Polanyi” in this period. Instead I argue Poteat was teaching a method of “cultural conceptual analysis” (CCA) - a way of doing Religion and Culture - in which Polanyi was only one ally and example.

While preparing this presentation, I remembered a file drawer with about a foot and a half of folders from my Duke years. So my remarks today are based *not only* on the foggy recollection of an aging professor in his early 60’s remembering events in the late sixties – I actually had some primary sources to work from in reconstructing Polanyi’s influence on Poteat’s teaching.

The paper that resulted from this exercise runs more than 40 minutes. I have shared it with the panelists. I can only share a few sections in my time this afternoon.

## **Poteat in the Classroom**

You may not know that, prior to discovering Polanyi in the early fifties, William H. Poteat, was born in 1919, grew up in China as a child of American Baptist missionaries, graduated from Oberlin and Yale Divinity School, and wrote a dissertation at Duke titled “Pascal’s Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility” in 1950.

In my view, this dissertation is much more important than Polanyi for understanding/explaining what Bill was up to in teaching when I studied with him. It was a huge project that treated developments in early modernity from Renaissance painting through political theory.

E.A. Burtt, Whitehead, Temple, along with Bill’s analysis of primary sources (my notes stress Descartes and Pascal) contributed to discussions of mathematics, method, and metaphysics, the bifurcation of nature, the exteriorization of sensibility, mechanism, technical reason, modernity’s alternation between pride and despair, and the consequent unintelligibility of man.

This was philosophical anthropology on a grand scale, and plenty of gold ore was uncovered for refinement in future years.

While you can find in it some anticipation of Polanyian themes, there is a much broader and deeper agenda being set that I think Bill was still working on in the period under review.

My first class with Bill was Christianity and Culture 16 (CC16), a required first-year course for Duke Divinity students who had had some exposure to philosophy in their BA. This was a close reading of one book each by Marx, Darwin, Freud, and B.F. Skinner. We were required to write 300 word “arguments” each Friday (plus or minus 2 words). Learning to recognize a central conceptual problem and deal with it in a short argument was a crucial skill. But learning how deeply my own thinking, and the thinking of the wider culture, had been shaped by the conceptual commitments underlying Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Skinner was revelatory.

In the lively class discussions, we could not think and argue our ways out of the very perspectives we were trying to oppose as Bill played an incredibly skilled dialectical devil’s advocate. Philosophy majors like Ron Hall and Larry Churchill were the stars in delivering incisive fast pitches that Bill would blast out of the park, always in good humor, as he continued to demonstrate how we were all Skinnerians, Marxists, Darwinists, and Freudians even, sometimes especially, when we tried to argue with them. Bill could also take the stammerings of confused participants such as me and help us find our voices as we began at least to recognize the hazards

in the dangerous waters of modernity's Cartesian conceptual hang-ups, objectivist obfuscations, and dualistic dead-ends.

Polanyi was not assigned and was rarely introduced explicitly as a contributor to this enterprise. My notes contain many references to Ron Hall, but only one marginal note about Polanyi. Surely Polanyi was in the background—we did spend several weeks trying to convince an Azande-like Poteat that he should adopt scientific horticulture as we learned about arguments and changing one's mind. Perhaps Polanyi contributed to Bill's analysis of the conceptual commitments at stake in the impact of evolution on modernity, but my notes are more about the conceptual innovations around the contingency Christianity introduced into Western thought that allowed the move from Aristotle to Darwin, the Exodus event as radically different from the Greek cosmos, and other differences in Semitic and Greek concepts. With B.F. Skinner, perhaps Polanyi was closer to the surface: I find notes on experiments in subception and arguments that what we have with Pavlov's dog is "an active center seeking to maximize meaning rather than a S-R response machine."

But this was not a course about Polanyi, an introduction to Polanyi, or one taught from Polanyi's perspective. Apparently, there is an unpublished paper Bill wrote about teaching Religion and Culture which discusses the method to this dialectically maddening and thrilling experience: "I found, for example, that while tacitly, by an acritically-received cultural inheritance, they were Marxists, Freudians, Darwinists, neo-behaviorists, or what have you, their explicit professions were different from and incompatible with these views, even though this was almost never recognized by them" (*Primacy of Persons [POP]*, p. 4). Nickell and Stines draw from and comment on this approach the Introduction to *POP*: "*The comprehension of such contradictions, as the world has known since Socrates, is an exercise in therapy in the best sense of that word*" (4-5).

In 1967, Bill's appointment was primarily in the Divinity School. Along with CC16, he taught electives on "Religion and Tragedy" and "Religion and Art." The information I have about those courses shows little influence of Polanyi. There is certainly no Polanyi in the 11 page bibliography on religion and art he distributed, including among the 42 books under the heading "Selected books dealing with aspects of the intellectual history and characteristic sensibility of modernity." This is an obvious place for Polanyi, but there is no reference to his work. And remember this area of art and Western culture was his intended focus when he went to Greece on sabbatical in 1968.

Regular graduate seminars were offered: Existentialism, Religious Language, and one that often used *Personal Knowledge*.

Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, Kierkegaard, and Polanyi were the core of Religion and Culture and Bill's approach to cultural conceptual analysis. Seminars with vague titles allowed Bill to assign them and/or others he wanted to examine: Piaget, Ricoeur, Elizabeth Sewell, Walker Percy, George Steiner, Joseph Church. The method of cultural conceptual analysis he was teaching us used these big five as we learned to think in ways that began to liberate us from our critical, objectivist, Cartesian proclivities and claim post-critical voices.

We didn't really "learn about" the thinkers we read so closely. On more than one occasion when asked about "research expectations for papers," Bill proclaimed: "Anyone caught doing research in this course will be summarily shot!" We were instructed to go for "the jugular"—the core conceptual commitments through which these radical thinkers broke through or failed to break through the impasses of modernity, the ways their understanding of knowing, being, acting, perceiving, speaking, learning, and teaching broke out of the

conceptual dilemmas and dead-ends that were destructive of what Stines and Nickell chose to call their book, *The Primacy of Persons*.

His advisees would then apply this perspective to a problem or a thinker, and the range was incredible. Dissertations were written on Erik Erickson, Walker Percy, Elizabeth Sewell, social theory, literature, philosophical issues and thinkers, and, sometimes theology. Polanyi might be central to that effort, as he was in my attempt to show Polanyi as an alternative to the Sociology of Knowledge. But he was not always the central figure and sometimes was not even involved in dissertations written under Bill.

Bill Poteat moved from the Divinity School to the Department of Religion about 1970. When Tom Langford became Dean of the Divinity School, Bill was appointed chair of the undergraduate Religion Department, a major change professionally and a new stage from which to display his considerable gifts. So there was a lot going on – including complications in his personal life. I don't think he wrote much in this period apart from essays that came out of his teaching.

I suspect that during these nine years between finishing *IH* and beginning *PM*, Polanyi's thought was always around as Bill taught, lectured at Texas and Stanford, spent time in Greece and arranged an exhibit of Moustaki's work at Duke, etc. But Polanyi was often not in Poteat's focal attention in teaching, nor do I find evidence in my notes, his writing, or my recollections that Polanyi offered the predominant or over-arching perspective from which he taught and engaged in cultural conceptual analysis.

Of the 10 courses that I took under Professor Poteat, of which I have some record, only one had Polanyi (*KB*) assigned. Only *The Tacit Dimension* is on the reading list of 18 books for the Religion and Culture preliminary exam I took under Bill in January, 1972. My notes indicate Polanyi appeared in discussions where his concepts were helpful, but Polanyi does not seem to be the platform, framework, or focus of attention that often.

What was the method – what was Bill doing – what were we trying to learn to do?

The term I have come to prefer, “cultural conceptual analysis,” is not really history of ideas, not exactly philosophy, not “religion and culture” in any of the various ways that phrase is often used.

In the unpublished essay “Religion and Culture as I See It” quoted by Stines and Nickell, Bill writes that he thinks of culture “not as a certain form of social order or a system of practice or as physical artifacts, but as a repertoire of concepts, models, metaphors, analogies, images, picturings, myths, and stories shaping the life of a people.” (*POP*, 11) Cultural conceptual analysis was Bill's method for recognizing, analyzing, and dissecting modern culture in this sense and providing therapeutic alternatives for the problematic status of the human in modernity's developing conceptual configuration.

It's cultural because it is deeper than any specific articulations or disciplines. Charles Taylor talks about “social imaginaries” and “cosmic imaginaries” in ways that remind me of Bill. But unlike Taylor's endless summaries of intellectual history, Bill somehow could get to the core conceptual commitments of the underlying logic of modernity more directly. He was somehow digging into the level from which ideas, theories, articulated frameworks emerge, but pulling forth the basic models, metaphors, concepts that emerge again and again in modernity. They are far in the background – on the horizon – yet these cultural conceptual commitments shape – and in many cases in modernity mis-shape – our understanding and even our lives. So discovering them, seeing

how they are driving us and driving us mad, is very much like analysis in that can be therapeutic.

“Analysis” in this approach brings to mind at least two associations: ordinary language analysis and analysis in the Freudian tradition. Some of Poteat’s tools, tricks, even content, came from the former. Bill’s incredible classroom riffs may have drawn from Wittgenstein, Austin, Wisdom, and others more often than I recognized, untrained philosophically as I was. Many comparisons could be made with the Freudian meaning of “analysis,” including the “therapeutic” dimension mentioned by Stines and Nickell and cited above.

The best written examples of cultural conceptual analysis would be the introduction to *IH* and the essay “Persons and Places.” This seminal essay, which is in *POP*, was one that Bill *did* distribute to classes – at least as early as 1968. It is not dependent, explicitly or tacitly, on Polanyi in my reading. The *IH* essay Ron Hall comments upon in his reflections (“Myths, Stories, History, Eschatology and Action: Some Polanyian Meditations”) is also up there among the best examples of Poteat’s cultural conceptual analysis, in that case cultural conceptual analysis working with Polanyi’s innovations.

Knowing how much he had invested in Polanyi, I may be underestimating how important Polanyi was for Bill’s teaching during this period. If I could travel back in time I might find much more attention to and reliance on Polanyi. I certainly find a lot of Polanyi in his three books written after this period, and to edit *IH* he must have been immersed in Polanyi at a depth most of us will never attain.

One note I found would suggest that much of my attempt to represent Poteat is likely wrong. It was at the end of some clarification of confused arrangements sent out for the Dutch Creek Falls Symposium in 1974 by a member of that group, a gathering of former students of Bill’s that occurred in the mountains of North Carolina each summer for about 6 years. The group’s focus was often on the teaching challenges we were finding early in our careers. Bill’s participation in this ongoing convivial order of his former advisees and others who became interested in his approach to religion and culture exemplifies his commitment to teaching. The note addressed to a list of 40 members of the diaspora, probably from Ben Ladner because it is signed with a large “B,” stated: “Furthermore, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that you don’t know what the hell’s going on, neither do I. Neither does Stines, neither does Gus. So there!! Prayerfully, B.”

*Addendum:* In the discussion that followed our panel presentations, Dave Rutledge recalled that Poteat did offer a seminar on *Personal Knowledge* in 1971. There were other courses during this period of which I don’t have records, and they may have emphasized Polanyi. Interesting as well was Diane Yeager’s report that Bill gave her a copy of *Intellect and Hope* and inscribed it for her when she arrived for graduate study in 1971 thus emphasizing the importance of Polanyi for what she was beginning. My point is not that Polanyi was unimportant in Poteat’s teaching, but that cultural conceptual analysis as taught by Poteat was much more than Polanyi. I know I did not read Polanyi thoroughly until my dissertation research.

Ron Hall’s contribution to this panel, which I read only after writing mine, confirms my point above about “analysis” and provides important insights into the origins and impact of Wittgenstein and ordinary language analysis in Poteat’s approach to cultural conceptual analysis. Students more familiar with that tradition might have seen even more of this influence in Bill’s teaching than I could. I suspect this influence went far beyond mere content and, indeed, shaped the basic ways he engaged students, asked questions, identified and approached problems, and led classroom and seminar discussions in his inimitable style.