

William H. Poteat: Liberating Theologian For Polanyi ?

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ABSTRACT Key Words: William Poteat and Michael Polanyi; Polanyi's ambivalent relation to Christian theological perspectives; Poteat's post-critical theological commitment; Poteat and human spiritual qualification; an answer to Polanyi.

As is well known among readers of Tradition and Discovery, William H. Poteat was a central influence in bringing Michael Polanyi to the attention of American scholars and, particularly, to the interest of scholarship in religion and theology. Poteat's own work was heavily impacted by Polanyi. In turn, Polanyi's affiliation with Poteat at Duke and elsewhere clearly impressed and edified Polanyi and led to Polanyi's request for Poteat's collaboration with him on Meaning and to the prospect of Polanyi's coming to Duke for six weeks to facilitate this. Unfortunately, that promising time was not realized. This present essay represents an effort to discern a direction in which such a collaboration might have deeply and felicitously influenced Polanyi's interpretation and celebration of his own poignant, yet quite restless, religious sensibilities.

I have been away from intense reflection on the work of Polanyi and Poteat for so long that my return was both exciting and frustrating because every second page of reviewing offered fresh interest and beckoning suggestions for what should be my focus for this present discussion. But finally my review of the Scott-Moleski biography of Polanyi and the passages on his religio-theological perspective evoked in me the question of whether Polanyi read any of Poteat's essays, either before or after Poteat's closer personal contact with Polanyi. I note that Poteat cited from Polanyi as early as 1954 (in "The Open Society and Its Ambivalent Friends") but without noting the specific source (likely *The Logic of Liberty*[1951], xvii). On the other hand, so far as I have been able to discover from Polanyi's published works, there is nowhere mention of Poteat on issues theological or otherwise. Indeed, Richard Gelwick, in a communication to me on September 15, 2008, confirmed this conclusion in his comment that he did "not recall [Polanyi having made] any specific conceptual or other reference to Poteat" in either his reading of Polanyi's writings or in his many conversations with him. Gelwick goes on to emphasize that this is not to deny the major role that Poteat played in encouraging Polanyi through conversations with him, by bringing him to Duke in the spring of 1964 and, four years later, by co-editing with Thomas Langford *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, thereby introducing Polanyi to a considerably larger and more appreciative audience in America than he had found at home. That Polanyi never cited or otherwise referred to Poteat in any of his writings, Gelwick says, "is not totally surprising" since "Poteat's reluctance to publish his thought limited the chances of Polanyi referring to it." Poteat's first book-length publication, *Polanyian Meditations*, Gelwick reminds us, didn't appear until "1985, nine years after Polanyi's death." It is worth noting, however, that both Phil Mullins and Marty Moleski have indicated (correspondence from October 2008) that there is evidence Polanyi had read some of the essays in *Intellect and Hope* and had been favorably impressed.

A time most outstanding for a potentially decisive input from Poteat came in 1972 when Polanyi asked Poteat to help him with the volume that he, Polanyi, was engaged upon with Harry Prosch. As the biography notes, "Polanyi even suggested that he (Polanyi) might spend six weeks at Duke, although he was happy with Poteat's alternative proposal of coming to Oxford" (see biography, p. 262). In the end, however, Poteat could not fulfill that prospect, and this apparently auspicious moment never came to fruition. The "Acknowledgments" in *Meaning* specify that thanks should go to Richard Gelwick "for the numerous discussions he found time to hold with Professor Polanyi relevant to the subject matter" of that book. Whatever the quite limited influence

that Poteat appears to have had on Polanyi's thinking, my interest in this essay is to consider how Poteat could have been — or would have been — a kind of Dantian Beatrice for Polanyi's apparently quite intense, but in some ways quite hesitant and tenuous, wanderings toward the light of a more confident, dare we say a more "paradisial" religious dwelling place.

I was particularly touched by an account, in Scott and Moleski's *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher (MP)* of some of Polanyi's comments — in the unpublished supplement to his 1969 lectures given at U. of Texas and U. of Chicago — on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's funeral oration for Adolf von Harnack. Polanyi quotes: "Corruptible puts on incorruptible . . . Death where is thy victory?" Then he goes on to say "I now realize how revealing such words are for our destiny even though there is no information given by them. And I can think now of the depth of my own life being expressed by the words, spoken by the congregation on their knees, 'Our Father which art in heaven' and so on, though literally I believe none of the Lord's prayer." (*MP*, 273).

In the larger context of Polanyi's pilgrimage and discourse concerning religion, this final clause, "literally I believe none of the Lord's prayer," notwithstanding the richness of this statement as a whole, hints at a rather surprising mental cramp bespeaking either a momentary, or lingering, failure of nerve — a slip toward a Cartesian object for which Polanyi's whole epistemological tour de force is the massive relieving massage. However, it appears that very many of us have felt that, as exhibited here and elsewhere — especially in *Meaning* — Polanyi was somewhat paralyzed in his religious pilgrimage, with all of its passion and hopefulness, by this shadow of positivistic, essentialistic linguistic theory. In *Meaning* (157) having spoken eloquently of Pauline Christianity, Polanyi says, "None of those beliefs makes any literal sense. They can be destroyed as easily as the actuality of Polonius' death upon the stage should anyone attempt to defend its reality in the world of facts." Here, it appears that Polanyi had lost his own counsel to that of I.A. Richards.

However, in what seems to me a rather potent and instructive "on the other hand," Bill Poteat's pilgrimage of faith — especially within the ambience of his Polanyian meditations (not just in the book by that name) — presents a striking contrast! I find support for this emphasis in any number of places in my personal relationship to Bill and in many places in his writings. One of the most forthright among these is to be found in an unpublished letter of April, 1991 to Professor Walter Mead which Wally shared with me two months after receiving it. He has given me license to quote from that letter. Without Wally's pertinacious questioning of Poteat, we would not have, to my knowledge, any other such bold and unequivocal comments on certain specific aspects of his ongoing relation to the Christian faith. Therefore, I quote somewhat at length here. All of the italics are Poteat's. The quotations imply the questioning to which Poteat was responding:

Though I have not looked at most of the pieces you are reading in the Stines-Nickell collection for many years, I believe I can say that I still stand now where I stood forty years ago in the practice of my life, before God—sometimes actually, sometimes virtually—in the posture of prayer and confession

To make an unquestionably artificial distinction between my mode of dwelling acritically in the world as one who, in the setting of corporate worship, affirms the Apostle's Creed *without reservation*, on the one hand, and my critically reflective self that wishes to confront the challenge of the Enlightenment skeptic that is in me and all my modern fellows that calls for theological and philosophical arguments on the other, I should say that I have hardly changed at all with respect to the first, but have laboriously undertaken shifts (in) the ground upon

which to carry out the second.

In short my *faith* (as the logos of the way I live my life) remains essentially unchanged; but my “theology” (understood as the attempt to *explicate* the logos of that faith) has undergone a *very* radical change This last I discovered, I believe, simply by paying painful attention in a radical new way to my own modes of being as *through and through* responsible to God—standing within my own mindbody, on *this* earth, with *my* unique history, in a *particular* cultural setting, at *this* time and place, and with *these* duties. All meaning and meaning-discernment is centered in, radiates from and retotends this mindbody that achieves such integrity as it may have by being before God, who, while he is above all in magnitude, is also closer to me than I am to myself

Now for the question of the afterlife! When I, in the context of corporate worship declare, *Inter alia*, “. . . I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” I do not take myself to be granting *notional assent* . . . to a proposition such as $12 \times 12 = 144$ (though even *this* is no longer quite the same under the new dispensation), but rather to be *enacting* and *identifying* in as direct a way as can be (that is, there is nothing second-order, derivative, metaphorical, symbolical about it) one of the features in the structure of the one and only world in which I actually live and move and have my being, *insofar as I recognize it as existing before God*. And the enactment of the resurrection of the body affirms that I, this particular man, in *this* history, bearing the scars upon my body and upon my psyche . . . have my being and value *through and through* in God’s eternal and never failing providence both in this moment and forever

But, of course, you ask: is that world real of which the resurrection of the body is a feature that you have enacted and identified? Answer: as real as *any* world that is made by our uttered words to appear; for it has exactly the same ground in the asseverations of our convivial mindbodies. And there *is* no other world.

“Everlasting life,” then, is life in the bosom of God who is Alpha and Omega and in whom my mortal life in history with all its earthly trappings is granted its eternal significance.

Here and in any number of places in Poteat’s writings the radical nature of his epistemology and the correlative ontology is seen by him to be both derivative of, and applicable to, the primordial indicative of the “I am” of Biblical faith and, I believe, of what Soren Kierkegaard, by way of Johannes Climacus, called “pathetic dialectic.” For Poteat, I am both in the world and yet transcend it; I am that being whose being or non-being is systematically elusive to language and concept, yet proleptically present in every moment of the *Cogito*. Many of the cognate issues here are encountered in such early writings as “God and the Private-I”; “I Will Die”; “Birth, Suicide, and the Doctrine of Creation” and in his later works discussing, for example, the Eucharist in “Memory and Imagination” or, in *Recovering the Ground*, the relative status in the real world of trees and the Last Judgment. Poteat finds himself, as it were, in the position of attempting to persuade someone that he ought to think of the world as having been created. *That*, he says “. . . is not unlike persuading a man who speaks a language having no personal pronouns that there are persons.” (See “Birth, Suicide . . .”, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture*, p. 168). This, of course, was essentially the problem Kierkegaard set for himself: How does one support the claim that subjectivity is truth?

Did Polanyi's apparent light and joy in the conviviality of The Moot and in prayer finally address his doubts about whether he believed in God, as he put it, "... in any sense which made a difference"? Would exposure to Poteat's constant drumbeat—apparently so resonant with Polanyi's deepest epistemological insights—have led Polanyi, a la Dante's Beatrice, beyond the inferno of his doubts into Il Paradiso? Or is that just one of those utterly absurd and irrelevant questions to which St. Augustine and, perhaps Poteat himself, would have said that God is creating Hell for those who ask such questions? Still—might conviviality in Poteat's kind of relentless critique of our and Polanyi's Cartesian lapses have made any inroads for Polanyi's ascent in matters religious and theological?

In January, 1988, Poteat wrote a letter to me in which he said, "I really am a hopeless Yahwist. For me the world is creature; and in our knowings we respond as persons to it as to its creator" (see *P of P*, p. 19). In this connection we should note that in Poteat's writings, there is almost a refrain, a recurring, usually indirect, reference in early and later writings to the peculiar power and relevance of Anselm's ontological argument from the thought of a being whose non-being is inconceivable. It is clear that for Poteat, as for Kierkegaard, the conviviality of my "I am" with the "I am" of the God relation bespeaks a (pneumatic) spiritual qualification of my being. As Kierkegaard (*Anti-Climacus*) puts it, that in me which is enabled to relate positively to my being as finite freedom is *transparently* grounded in God who is that in which all things are possible. Is that treatise (*Sickness Unto Death*) then to be taken to be some sort of argument for the existence of God which is on all-fours with traditional "rational" proofs? Clearly not. The "dialectic" here may be said to be, in a broad sense, phenomenological—the self as beheld from the horizon of *Anti-Climacus*, the eminently Christian psychologist. As Kierkegaard (*Climacus*) would have it, it is a "pathetic dialectic" which constantly directs, almost coerces, the "reader" to pay attention to her own existence.

It is clear that, for Poteat, there is no dichotomy of the cosmological argumentation and the ontological argumentation. Both presuppose "something thought can't think" – that historical mindbodily being, tensed, oriented, evoked - -apart from which neither memory, nor hope, nor project, nor concept is conceivable. Thus it is not the abstracted Cartesian *cogito* or "rational dialectic" which is transparent to the God-relation, but – and I believe Poteat to be at one with Kierkegaard here – pathetic dialectic. Fully to take up the inescapable presence which I am is to take up the convivial presence, both the given and received, of the "I am" of that Being whose being and whose non-being are alike inconceivable, yet closer to me than I am to myself even though I am (in St. Augustine's terms) "very far from Thee." This spiritual qualification is inalienable even when as Poteat notes (in a powerful, usually overlooked article entitled "The Absence of God"), God shows us His back and not His face; and we could add, present in Job's mindbody-numbing pain when he cries out (paraphrase), "When will it be, you watcher of men, that you leave me alone long enough for me to swallow my spit?" (see Job 7:19-20); and certainly in Pilate's disclaimers when, about to release Jesus to execution, he asks "What is truth" and washes his hands; and, ultimately, even, perhaps especially, in Jesus' "cry of dereliction".

I have come to see Poteat's work as an utterly relentless foray into communicating the pneumatic qualification of human existence. He is joining St. Paul in Paul's letter to the Romans (8:16) in testifying that "The Spirit himself and our spirit bear convivial (united) witness that we are the children of God." (*Jerusalem Bible*, but with my emendation changing "united" to "convivial").

Recall that in *Meaning* Polanyi quoted, in affirmation, from George Santayana as follows: Should we ever "hear the summons of a liturgical religion calling to us: *sursum corda*, Lift up your hearts, we might sincerely

answer, *habemus ad Dominum*. Our hearts by nature are addressed to the Lord.” (*Meaning*, p. 180). This follows upon his claim that we are addressed by nature to the attainment of meaning. I believe that, in his religio-theological pilgrimage, had he spent that hoped-for time with Poteat, he would have experienced a still more comprehensive summons to meaning than even his own marvelous sense for the personal sources of meaning and the correlated freedom had yet realized. Then, perhaps, the thought of his relation to the, implicitly cognitively empty, “literal” Pauline scheme of redemption and the Lord’s Prayer would have seemed a strange remnant from his pre- post-critical infancy.

Notes on Contributors

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My knowledge of Poteat is based exclusively on his written work. I never met him in person nor studied under him. During the writing of my doctoral dissertation in early 1998, however, when my research had foundered at a particularly debilitating aporia, I sought guidance from my internal examiner, Professor John Hayes of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland. He quietly but sternly advised me: “These things take time: they should not be rushed. Breakthrough will come.” He went on to tell me about his own experience as a graduate student in the U.S. – at Duke University, North Carolina, in 1969-71 – under the tutelage of one William Poteat (“Have you heard of him?”). He read from a letter he had just received from his former tutor composed of a language that, although I could scarcely recognize the significance of it at the time, activated something latent in me. John then presented me with an essay by Poteat titled “Paul Cezanne and the Numinous Power of the Real.” I read it on the bus on the way home amid a growing visceral excitement. This was it! . . . what I had been intuitively searching for: an elegant and forceful critique of subject/object dualism, a passionate and relevant deployment of personal knowledge, the beginnings of a new aesthetic theory, a language attuned to the experience of being without the quasi-mystical Heideggerian solemnity – in short, a solution to the aporia that had deadlocked my progress. John was right: breakthrough did come.

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