

# Bill Poteat: Colleague?

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*Bill Poteat was a member of Duke University's Department of Religion and served a term as Chairman, during which I served with him as Director of Undergraduate Studies. I knew him as a brilliant scholar who devoted his exceptional gifts primarily to his teaching and his students. He was charming, gracious, yet we his Duke professorial colleagues never really knew him. One of our ranks suggested that the idea of Bill as a colleague was an oxymoron. Bill did not attend professional meetings and only rarely had conversation of any sort with colleagues. He lived in Chapel Hill and not Durham. However, he seemed not to be at home in any of his academies-UNC Philosophy Department, Duke Divinity School, or finally the Duke Department of Religion. It was not clear what his commitments were. I knew that he had a Christian heritage and perhaps a Christian "hangover," and had a Divinity degree from Yale. Nevertheless, his personal faith was not publically expressed. Perhaps it found expression in his zealous efforts to overcome the Cartesianism of the modern mind which he contended was inimical to the Christian understanding of the human person and his/her relationship to God. Yet, he was restless, rarely present to us and perhaps also to himself.*

My assignment on this panel is to talk about William Poteat as a colleague. My colleagues and I at Duke University recognized that Bill was an impressive and remarkable man, as all of these panel presentations have indicated. He was an attractive person—brilliant, widely read, very charming, even winsome, and a scintillating intellectual. However, he was a mystery. I don't think any of us in the Department of Religion knew him or began to know him. He lived not in Durham, but ten miles away, in Chapel Hill. He had started his teaching in 1947 in the Philosophy Department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In 1957, he relocated to the new Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, in Austin, Texas, and three years later, in 1960, he returned to North Carolina to teach at the Duke Divinity School.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in 1970, he moved to the Department of Religion at Duke. [Someone commented that he had received his Ph.D. in Religion from Duke and that this, perhaps, was relevant to his returning to Duke rather than to UNC.] Anyway, when he switched from UNC to the Episcopal Seminary, then to Duke, he also moved from Philosophy to Divinity, from a primarily undergraduate humanities faculty to (at Duke) a graduate professional school, a recognized theological school of the Methodist Church, and eventually to Duke's (primarily undergraduate) Department of Religion, where he served a term as its chair.

During all the time he was with us — some 27 years, until his retirement from Duke in 1987 — we never heard his story. I have learned more about Bill Poteat at this meeting than I ever learned while he was my colleague in the Department of Religion. It seems, as I look back, that he did not share his self-understanding, his personal or his professional story, with any of his colleagues. He was simply absent in spirit and mind, and — with his residence in Chapel Hill — generally absent in body. He spent little time in the Department precincts except for meetings with his students and for mandated departmental meetings that he chaired with considerable success. Otherwise he was minimally present. We rarely had coffee, not to mention a beer, together; we shared no extra-curricular time that I recall. He did not attend meetings of the American Academy of Religion, regional or national, even when his colleagues were performing. In short, he was not really a colleague in the sense that we normally think of a colleague. In fact, one of my colleagues who was also Bill's and whom I asked about Bill as a colleague, retorted, "Bill as a colleague? That is an oxymoron." Another one volunteered, "I don't think you want to hear

from me because I would be too critical.” As a colleague Bill was a *homo absconditus*; present but unrevealing.

While he was not a professor with colleagues, he was a teacher with students, as these papers have strikingly demonstrated. One of my colleagues, Tom McCollough, did have more of a relationship with Bill than did the rest of us. He was writing a book at one point during Bill’s tenure as chairman and was having a bit of difficulty. Tom mentioned his problems to Bill, who graciously agreed to meet with him on a regular basis to read and discuss his manuscript. He proved to be quite helpful, a very good teacher. I should also mention here another exceptional moment of collegiality, namely Poteat’s collaboration with Professor Tom Langford in the 1968 publication of *Intellect and Hope: Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*.<sup>2</sup> It is significant, however, that Langford was first of all a theologian. (After serving as chair of the Department of Religion, he was appointed Dean of the Divinity School in 1971.) But he was also a productive student of philosophy who could and did engage Poteat and support Poteat’s interest in Polanyi. On the other hand, Poteat, to my knowledge, had no interest in Langford the theologian or in his theology, and there was no further collaboration. As I have said, Bill was first and finally a teacher. And his community was essentially a community of his students. Not too surprisingly, he married a student, one of his more promising graduate students.

The focus of his teaching was not the history or tradition of philosophy but rather his own philosophy, which appears to have been developing in and through his teaching. I remember a retreat we once had as a department. We read together a short play that Bill had copied for us. (I think it was “The Teacher,” or something similar.) In any case, the play was about a professor who talked much and expected his students to give it all back. His calling was to fill those empty vessels with his wisdom. But there was one student that the professor just could not reach; the student had a toothache. After all, he was embodied, and that body was getting in the way of his (the professor’s) teaching. This was the one time that Bill shared with us, as a department, something that revealed a bit of his thinking. Nevertheless, we had a sense of what Bill was teaching because we knew some of his students, but not because of his having had a direct conversation with any of us. We did know that he was very troubled by the subject-object dichotomy and the disembodied ego-centrism of Cartesianism. I must admit here that I am unqualified to say much at all about his post-Cartesianism. I am, after all, an inveterate theologian — hardly a philosopher. My theologian is Karl Barth, and in this connection I am reminded of a passage in Barth where he speaks of the “all too triumphal overcoming of the subject and object dichotomy.” [Audience laughter.] But Poteat did overcome the subject-object dichotomy . . . as all of you [fellow panelists] have told me one way or another. This was our impression of Bill.

At the end of his life, I had a feeling, a sense, of Bill’s loneliness. Sadly, his dying days were scarcely noted in the Department of Religion. I visited him during those days, not often I fear, and I left for our Shaw Island residence in Washington before he died. I think Tom McCollough also visited him, but to my knowledge not many others [among his former faculty colleagues].<sup>3</sup> I was thinking, as you were discussing the possibility of establishing a Poteat archive at Duke, that I would not be able to suggest to whom you might go today, at Duke, to pursue the project. There are probably very few who would recognize his name. I think his legacy is the legacy that you all [panelists], as his students, have preserved and might pass on. But I don’t suspect that, otherwise, there is much of his legacy at Duke University today. It is sad and disappointing because he was such a remarkable man. But he was not really our colleague or a part of the Duke community.

I must tell you about my last visit with him. He was virtually bedridden. We had an interesting conversation, one that may say something about him, or at least my perception of him. I mentioned to him that, sometimes when I am writing, I get stumped by what I am trying to say. I can’t work through the puzzle that I have taken upon myself; so I have to pick up a pencil and scratch my way through. I can’t do it on the computer. I have

to get more of my body into it. When I told Bill about this, he immediately resonated and lit up. He knew what I was talking about.

But one question I had, after I had finished my last visit with him, was (without wishing to be too critical of him): How good a listener was Bill? I know Bill was a wonderful teacher when there were, in his students, open vessels. This was his community. One of the questions Dale Cannon raised here is: Why was Bill not more widely, or better, received by the larger community of scholars? In response, my question is: What was there for him to learn from that community?

Do you [fellow panelists] remember that time when you got Bill to come to the AAR / Polanyi Society annual meeting (November 19 - 20, 1993, in Washington, D.C.), which was to focus on Bill and his philosophic vision? That was one of the most memorable moments in my academic life. You will remember it if for no other reason than that Bill was present, at an AAR meeting. He was, of course, the occasion for the [section] gathering. And do you not still hear his remarkable claim? (This was not a student's evaluation): He had accomplished a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. Now, that being the case, what of significance was he to learn from other, pre-revolutionary philosophers? He had, after all, created a radically new world of philosophy. And this revolution evidently laid upon Bill a huge revolutionary responsibility - namely, as Dale reported in his presentation, the task of curing "the crisis of modern culture, . . . its intellectual, culture-wide insanity," the "task of curing ourselves and returning us to ourselves as persons, to who we are as persons before God." Now, that is an overwhelming responsibility, and even if he *had* achieved a Copernican revolution in philosophy, could he seriously have imagined that he could fulfill such a responsibility?

Hearing these words, I have to say, to myself, "He is asking for Jesus," who did take on the responsibility to cure our souls and to restore ourselves before God. And with this, I am brought to the final, and perhaps first, question that Bill confronted me with, a question he never answered: Was he a Christian? Much suggests that he was, but not much is finally convincing. He did seem to have a Christian "hangover," a theological legacy of sorts. He was raised, I understand, in a devout, prominent, Baptist family and graduated from a divinity school, although he never was ordained. He left a fine Department of Philosophy for [a seminary, then] a Divinity School, and then a Religion Department.

[Panelist: Where did his Christian legacy play into his life?] That is a good question. Not in his language, not in his speech, not in his practice that any of us could recognize. And yet, I think it did play, as a secularized, [Dale Cannon interrupts: not entirely secularized, I think] . . . but uprooted vision of his responsibility. Along with this is an absence of concreteness — particularity in his thinking and "religious" discourse. It was only marginally theological or doctrinal. It was not "biblical" in any explicit, concrete way. The name "Jesus" is not heard, nor is Scripture cited. One does not hear echoes of the language of Canaan — an essential for authentic theological talk, according to Karl Barth. The Yahwist perspective that Poteat occasionally claimed for himself is abstract. And I have to think of Bill's inability to be settled in Chapel Hill, in Austin, in Duke's Divinity School, or in its Department of Religion. He was not happy in the Department; he was not happy in the Divinity School; he was not happy in Chapel Hill. Perhaps it was because he was judged by a memory, by an inherited "religious" vision of himself, by a hope that seemed well beyond him, whose fulfillment he could find in no place - not Chapel Hill, not Austin, not Duke, not Durham, no where.

This is my take on Bill. When I had my last time with him, I have to say I loved the man, but I felt he was in his Savior's hands, not his own, not in mine, and not in ours. What he was longing for, he was not to get here.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest ceased to exist after a few years.

<sup>2</sup>Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

<sup>3</sup>[Editor:] It should be noted that some of Bill Poteat's former students visited him in his final days. Ron Hall, in an e-mail dated 6-6-2008, recalls his and the late Taylor Scott's visit with Bill on his death bed: "He asked Taylor to preach the homily at his funeral at Duke Chapel and he asked me to say a prayer from Soren Kierkegaard. I read the prayer aloud to him on that last visit and he looked up at me and said: 'That guy could really pray!'" A large number of Poteat's former students, some traveling considerable distances, attended his funeral service.

## Notes on Contributors

**Walter B. Mead** ([wbmead@comcast.net](mailto:wamead@comcast.net)), President of the Polanyi Society since 2006 and Professor Emeritus, Illinois State University, had his only personal contact with Michael Polanyi in the summer of 1970, when he was invited to enjoy a full afternoon of conversation with Polanyi at Oxford University. His relationship with Bill Poteat, except for three or four personal visits with him, was primarily during the last twelve years of Poteat's life, when they carried on an extensive correspondence. He is the author of two books, *Extremism and Cognition: Styles of Irresponsibility in American Society* (1971) and *The United States Constitution: Persons, Principles, and Issues* (1987) and numerous articles that have appeared in *The Journal of Politics*, *The Review of Politics*, *The Political Science Reviewer*, *Judicature*, *Tradition and Discovery*, *Interpretation*, *Modern Age*, *Transaction/Society*, and *The Intercollegiate Review*.

**Robert T. Osborn** ([rosborn@nc.rr.com](mailto:rosborn@nc.rr.com)), B.A., University of California, L.A.; B.D., Garrett Biblical Institute; Ph.D., Drew University, is Emeritus Professor of Religion at Duke University. He enjoyed a distinguished 43-year career (1954-1997) of teaching in the Department of Religion at Duke, a span that completely encompassed Bill Poteat's years (1960-1987) on Duke's Divinity and Religion faculties. Indeed, given his association with Poteat until the latter's death in 2000, his 40-year acquaintance with Poteat represents the longest of all the contributors to this discussion. Professor Osborn's teaching responsibilities included Bible, Ethics, "Christian Thought," and the History of Christian Thought. But in all, he reminds us — despite his being first and foremost a theologian — as a member of a "Department of Religion" (as opposed to a theological seminary), he was under the academic stricture of circumventing such "forbidden five-letter words as *theos* and *logos*." Currently he lives with his wife, Dottie, half of the year in Durham, North Carolina, and the other half on Shaw Island, Washington.

**James W. Stines** ([jwsmtn@bellsouth.net](mailto:jwsmtn@bellsouth.net)) did his Ph.D. studies at Duke University 1964-70, during which time William H. Poteat was his major professor. Jim is Professor Emeritus (Philosophy/Religion) at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C. He has published previous essays in *TAD*, and he was guest editor for a special *TAD* edition on William Poteat: Vol. XXI, No.1, 1994-95. He also co-edited with James Nickell a collection of Poteat's essays entitled *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* (U. of Missouri Press, 1993).

**D.M. Yeager** ([yeagerd@georgetown.edu](mailto:yeagerd@georgetown.edu)) did her Ph.D. work at Duke University in the early 1970s in the "Religion and Culture" program (established by William Poteat), under the primary guidance of Poteat, who was also her dissertation director. Diane is the Thomas J. Healey Family Distinguished Professor in Ethical Studies in the Department of Theology at Georgetown University. Her articles have appeared in such publications as *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, *The Journal of Religion*, *Tradition & Discovery*, and *The Journal of Lutheran Ethics*.