

William H. Poteat and the Convertibility of Logic and Love

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ABSTRACT Key Words: William Poteat, ontology, mindbody, objective, subjective, relative, Michael Polanyi, post-critical, incarnation, transubstantiation, David L. Schindler.

My essay offers a personal reflection on Poteat as both a beloved teacher and philosopher. I suggest that Poteat's teaching and writing had to do most radically with describing an alternative ontology to the ones that have haunted both modern and postmodern thought. Poteat's ontology leads him to a profound embrace of the Incarnation and its liturgical celebration in the eucharist.

These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.¹

Who

Although Bill Poteat retired from Duke in 1987, he remained one of my teachers throughout my four years there. I was fortunate to be among a group of students who continued to meet in his home to discuss what he was writing (the early drafts of *A Philosophical Daybook*) or what we were (for most, our dissertations). To this day, I treasure those times, both for what I learned and for the wonderful encouragement and friendship Poteat provided.

But if asked what exactly I did learn from Poteat, I would be unable to provide an easy answer. My experience was that of most who knew him. It is almost impossible to separate the work from the man himself. This was not because Poteat sought to aggrandize himself, but rather because he embodied so thoroughly what he sought to teach. Despite this, his teaching and philosophy are illusive. I remember another of his students saying, "I know Poteat is saying something important, but I'll be darned if I can figure out what it is." Yet, as the dust has settled over the years, some aspects of Poteat's teaching have become clearer. In what follows, I will attempt to describe how so.

What

I think to understand what Poteat is saying it is crucial to see that he is not only discussing *epistemology*. He is, more basically, describing an *ontology* that goes radically against the way modernity and late (or post) modernity typically conceive it. Readers of Poteat will be familiar with his repeated use of "mindbody" as a way of recovering the ground on which we walk, think, speak and so forth. This ground, according to Poteat, has been obscured by a "discarnate spiritualism" and by "the hypertrophication of the values of literacy." Discarnate spiritualism positions the mind over against the body as in a Cartesianism in which the "notion of

mind *precedes* our notion of body and is indubitable . . .”² By the hypertrophication of literacy Poteat is referring to the dominance of a particular kind of seeing that inclines us to perceive of ourselves as spectators, even more as “a mere eye; in fact, a disembodied eye, which is oriented from no body of its own.”³ While such dualisms have been criticized many times over, they still pervade the air, Poteat states, “like chronic depression.”⁴

Yet what exactly *is* the ground Poteat wants to recover? He describes it as “our sentient, motile and oriented mindbodies in the world that are the ground of all meaning and meaning discernment, whence all reflection derives—even the literature of gnostic dreams.”⁵ On the one hand, this might not seem particularly radical. After all, as noted, few today would embrace Cartesianism, or a radical disjunction between the mind and the body. Furthermore, do not various postmodernisms endlessly remind us that all theory is contextual and embodied? The categories of race, gender and class are invoked in a vast array of ways to unveil (or deconstruct) how thinking (mind) is conditioned by these categories (body). These, however, are very different project(s) than what Poteat is about.

As I see it, Poteat is pointing to how our “mindbodily being” is shot through with *meaning* and, as he says, meaning discernment. This indicates that the structure of how things are cannot be separated from “values.” But “values” is a misleading word precisely because it has already been so deeply imbued with the assumptions of modernity. Modernity and late modernity often make “values” a matter of the will or, further, of subjective preference. At the same time, true knowledge is regarded as more objective. We can, for example, say that $2+2=4$ since this is an obvious fact, but we will have a more difficult time having shared views on abortion. If we return to Poteat’s description of the mindbody and meaning discernment, it might seem that his thought is only of minimal help. After all, we could say that, yes, there is meaning in a mathematical statement that derives from the “logic” of our mindbodies, but this mathematical meaning seems more “objective” or widely shared, than the kind of meaning-discernment related to our personal values. One might even argue that each mindbody being has his or her own “meaning discernment,” a belief leading to relativism.

Poteat made it clear, however, that those who worried about “relativism” had missed something important in what he had to say. He writes that “*even the literature of gnostic dreams*” issues from the meaning discernment of our mindbodies. The pertinent point here is that our meaning discerning mindbodies can come up with inadequate and distorted accounts of our *being* in the world. The whole premise of Poteat’s philosophy/theology is that this has in fact been the dominant case in the modern Western world. We suffer from a deeply fragmented sense of ourselves in the world (ontology), which has ushered in a deeply flawed epistemology.

To see more clearly what Poteat was about, we can turn to his friend Michael Polanyi and to Polanyi’s description of knowledge as *personal*. Poteat denied being a “Polanyian,” in the sense of claiming expertise on Polanyi’s philosophy. Rather, he was inspired by Polanyi as he began his own meditations towards a post-critical logic. Thus Poteat begins *Polanyian Meditations* with a quote from Polanyi, “Can science be said to rest on specifiable presuppositions, be it on rules of correct procedure or on substantial beliefs about the nature of things?” As Poteat notes, Polanyi’s question concerning how to *identify* beliefs is odd-sounding in the face of Enlightenment assumptions: “either one approaches inquiry free of any such beliefs; or one approaches it only in a state of lucidity about them.”⁶ As Poteat will go on to describe, “beliefs” are more deeply implicated in our being than we are wont to imagine. In fact, they are so “implicated” that we would cease to be if this were not so; we would cease to be alive. Even the beat of our hearts implies a meaning in the sense of a positive “logic” that orients us in the world of space and time. Our speaking (our grammar) relies upon a logic or “logos” that is shot through with meaning, as does a newborn’s interaction with her mother’s face and smile. The force of

the adjective “personal” captures this sense that all of who we are is oriented toward logic and meaning.

Such a summary (which only skims the surface of Poteat’s thought) might still not seem particularly *radical*. It is helpful to remember, though, the dualistic alternative that Poteat is writing against. As one philosopher describes it, this is “a dualizing of intellect and will: the dichotomy [between objectivity and subjectivity] presupposes a *mechanizing of the intelligence* (e.g., the order of ‘facts’) and a *‘voluntarizing’ of the will* (e.g., the order of ‘values’).”⁷ Poteat is offering an ontology that contrasts radically with the one that issues in a fact/value dualism. And he is saying that in the final analysis one cannot separate these. All facts are going to be grounded in our mindbodily quest and dependency on meaning (or “beliefs”), and all “values” are also already grounded in the mindbody “theories” about the world. Thus, “contrary to the subtly pervasive ‘picture’ in the regnant Cartesianism of this culture that conceptually estranges thought about our minds from thought about our bodies, formalized rationality—mathematics and formal logic—derives from and remains parasitical upon the ‘hanging togetherness’ and ‘sense-making’ of our integral mindbodily rootedness in the as yet unreflected world and in our unreflected ‘thinkings’ and doings in that world.”⁸

Why

What is interesting to consider is *why* Poteat can say what he is saying. For me personally, this is the most fascinating aspect of Poteat’s thought, and it is no doubt a complex question. Let me, however, venture at least a partial response that focuses on the question of ontology.

I was quite struck, recently, when I read an essay by David Schindler, discussing Theodore Hesburgh’s vision of the modern university. Like Poteat in some ways, Schindler was arguing that Hesburgh’s view was not radical enough, but rather left in place certain modern epistemological assumptions that were themselves the result of particular storied assumptions about the world. Schindler goes on to argue for the “convertibility” between fact and value, or mind and body, of, as Schindler states it, “logos” (order) and “love.” To this end, Schindler writes: “From such convertibility it follows that the basic order of the universe—hence the primitive meaning of object(-ivity)—*is not mechanistic*; and the love—hence subject(-ivity)—*in its primitive meaning is not arbitrary*.”⁹ What Schindler means by “love” is not modern sentiment but rather the love displayed by the Triune God who calls not only us, but the whole universe into being. The word “convertibility,” from my perspective, is absolutely crucial because it shows how we cannot ultimately separate the objective and the subjective. While for a variety of reasons a more explicit theology is not the focus of Poteat’s works,¹⁰ he both discusses and shows his debt to the God who creates, covenants and becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ. The kind of order, logic and meaning that we are as “mindbodies” derives from the logic/logos given to all creation. Even more, the incarnation reveals (most fully) not only the *love* of God in Christ but also the *logic* of all of creation.

Years ago, when I first heard Poteat say that he had come to the realization that transubstantiation is true, I was baffled. At the time, I thought it had to do mostly with Poteat’s understanding of language: language creates worlds and a word spoken “makes a world appear.” I do not doubt words create worlds, but I think Poteat’s move toward transubstantiation had to do more fully with his ontology. If God is incarnate (and if God is faithful to God’s own *dabhar*), then the creation of the bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ is as coherent (or logical) as the creation of the world itself. The same logic sustains both realities. Allow me to cite Poteat at length:

Then you believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation? Well, no. What I believe—and I do not think of it as something I believe, it goes much deeper than that, in fact, all the way to the bone—is that the bread and wine are the *presently actual* body and blood of Jesus Christ; and that, if they are not, then the Son of God has nothing to do with the concrete person I am in *this* time and place; and if this be so, the whole of Christianity is but an elaborate system of symbols at no point engaged with the actual fabric of this world.

I vividly remember Poteat once saying to me, “Beth, you are called to a place where there are no foundations.” Poteat believed that we were all, like Abraham, called by a Holy God to places of radical faithfulness. His own life and thought witnessed profoundly to the logic of this Divine love.

Endnotes

¹T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages, V,” in *Four Quartets*, <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/salvages.html>, my emphasis.

²William H. Poteat, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1993), 31.

³Ibid., 27

⁴Ibid. More fully, Poteat states “Cartesianism as an explicit philosophical doctrine is virtually without effect in this culture. It functions however at a tacit level like a repetition compulsion; it is ubiquitous and pervades the atmosphere of our life like chronic depression.”

⁵William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground, Critical Exercises in Recollection* (New York: SUNY, 1994), xiii.

⁶William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 11.

⁷David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church, Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 163. My emphasis.

⁸*Polanyian Meditations*, 9.

⁹Schindler, 166. My emphasis.

¹⁰At the 1993 AAR session with Poteat as invited guest, he mentioned his concern that theology was at times too easily invoked or too easily (and thus mistakenly) subsumed into the work of Polanyi or Wittgenstein.

Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join. If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Doug Masini (Douglas.Masini@armstrong.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list.