

# Political Theory and Political Theology: A Response To Mullins And Mead

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**ABSTRACT Key Words:** Polanyi, Poteat, Habermas, Lubac, Gunton, von Balthasar, epistemology, orality, literacy, communications media, liberalism, capitalism, Enlightenment, Christianity, Trinity.

*The author responds to reviews of two of his works, eventually extending the analysis of both books to argue that Michael Polanyi and William H. Poteat have, in their epistemological and phenomenological theories, articulated what amounts to a conception of the Holy Spirit in non-theological terminology, but that this conception needs to be more explicitly theologically informed to be refined.*

I would like to thank Phil Mullins and Wally Mead for their reviews of my books, *Speech and Political Practice* (SPP) and *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society* (TS). I find many of their criticisms quite valid, and in fact some of the issues they raise are ones that have occurred to me since the books were published. I will respond first to a couple of specific criticisms made by each and then to some more general issues raised by both reviewers. I will next use these general issues as a springboard to relate my discussion back to ideas found in both Michael Polanyi and Bill Poteat.

## **Communications Media, Greek Philosophy, Christianity, and Social Transformation**

In his review of SPP, Mullins raises an extremely important question about one aspect of my analysis. After summarizing my discussion of the effects of various communications media on human consciousness, he argues that my treatment of the new electronic media is too brief and oversimplified. In retrospect, I think this criticism is entirely justified. My discussion notes that some of the earliest writers on oral-literate differences, such as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan, thought that the new electronic media would break down the intensely visual orientation brought about by print literacy and bring about a “secondary orality” which would share some features of pre-printing press “primary orality” but would also be different in certain ways. But then I dismisses this argument and, drawing upon more recent theorists such as Neil Postman, argue that the electronic media produce an even more intensely visual orientation which results in a relativistic irrationalism as opposed to the objectivist rationalism produced by print literacy. (My argument, briefly, is that Ong and McLuhan based their theses on the effects of such media as radio and early, primitive television, which rely exclusively or very importantly on sound, but failed to recognize how television, once it had more fully developed, would become an overwhelmingly visual medium.) I now think this argument is wrong, for at least two reasons: it is too deterministic, and, as Mullins points out, it is simply too early to really know what changes in consciousness and social organization the new digital media might bring about. More generally, I think it would be most correct to say that any new type of communications media opens up a number of possibilities, and which ones a society eventually pursues will depend on a number of factors—none of which is completely determinative, since humans are, ultimately, at least somewhat free. And indeed, I think we can see such a situation emerging with the new electronic media. Enlightenment rationalism, which was clearly heavily influenced by print literacy, is unquestionably dead, no doubt at least partly because of the new media,

but it is not clear what will follow it; postmodernist irrationalism may emerge triumphant but this will not necessarily be the case (and hopefully will not be). It is quite possible that a new model of rationality, less dependent upon the metaphors encouraged by print literacy, could emerge, and that theorists such as Polanyi, Poteat, and Alasdair MacIntyre will be seen as among its pioneers. Certainly if the argument briefly described above—that digital media almost certainly produce a relativistic irrationalism—is correct, it becomes very difficult to explain the fact that many people today, including younger people, do find the work of Polanyi, MacIntyre, and other similar writers appealing.

TS is actually intended for a general audience, and as such inevitably contains some oversimplifications. Nevertheless, I think Mead is correct in pointing out a couple of places where I oversimplify a bit too much. As he notes, the discussion of the Greek philosophers focuses almost exclusively on Aristotle (with just a couple of paragraphs on Plato), which he finds disturbing, since he thinks Plato's philosophy articulates a grounding for morality at least as well as Aristotle's. My heavy concentration on Aristotle is actually just a function of the fact that most of the book is based on the lecture notes from my Introduction to Political Theory course (except, of course, that the book states my own views much more plainly than I ever could in class) and that there simply isn't enough time in a semester to cover both Plato and Aristotle in adequate detail, so I concentrate on Aristotle, because the students find him much more accessible. I think now, however, that (in the book) I should have discussed Plato more extensively, especially because his metaphysical vision can be very fruitfully contrasted with the early pagan, biblical, and modern worldviews.

Additionally, Mead points out that my discussion of Aristotle is potentially misleading in that it may give the impression that he sees human actions as essentially determined. I think this could be correct: in attempting to convey, in a way intelligible to a general audience, that Aristotle has a much more limited sense of human agency than modern people—or what is implied in the Bible—I may have made it sound like he has no real sense of human agency at all. This problem actually goes right to the heart of the central issue in the book: modern people have such an extreme sense of human agency that it is quite difficult, at least without getting somewhat technical, to explain theories, such as Aristotle's, that have a more limited sense of human freedom. (In the introductory class mentioned above, most students initially either get the impression that Aristotle sees humans as determined or else read a modern, that is radical, conception of choice into his discussion of that concept.) But in any case my explanation of will in Aristotle probably needs more detail to be clear.

I think there are two places where Mead does misread me. The first is in his third-to-last paragraph where he says that I overstate the case for Christianity and then elaborates by saying that I am mistaken in attributing the virtue of compassion solely to Christianity. But I am not arguing that compassion (not a term I actually use) is unique to Christianity; rather, a substantial sense of human creativity is. (And this heightened awareness of human creative capacities is very much a doubled-edged sword: it greatly expands human possibilities for evil as well as good.) Of course, I do also argue that an ethic of unconditional love (again, not the same thing as compassion) does logically follow from the biblical anthropology and is unique to Christianity, and that this ethic, however imperfectly realized, has eventually made a dramatic difference in the conditions of life in Western societies: democracy and individual rights developed in the Christian West, not elsewhere.

The second place where I think Mead perhaps misunderstands my intentions is in his very last paragraph where he states that “such a challenge [to create a new, truly Christian culture] is likely to be far more daunting than Jardine appears to recognize.” But I have no illusions about how difficult it will be to bring

about a fundamental transformation in human societies. It took centuries and centuries for Christianity even partly to dismantle the old pagan aristocratic culture, and it will undoubtedly take a very long time to construct an alternative to Enlightenment liberalism. Indeed, in my closing paragraph I hint that such a transformation may never actually take place. Also, the policy proposals discussed in the concluding chapters would hardly, in themselves, fundamentally change the structure of liberal societies; they are only a beginning. But one must begin somewhere.

In this regard, I recently read again *The Great Transformation*, the classic economic/historical work by Karl Polanyi (Michael's brother), and it has probably made me more pessimistic about the possibility of any significant social transformation in the near future. As Mead points out, I make a distinction between a market economy and a market society, arguing that a market economy becomes a market society (that is, one in which markets come to completely dominate social life and even define human self-understanding) only under certain cultural circumstances, such as occurred in the Western world as a consequence of the Enlightenment. But Karl Polanyi argues that a market economy (as opposed to an economy that makes some, but very limited, use of markets) necessarily requires the creation of a market society, because unless market relations become normative throughout society, markets themselves can never constitute the primary form of economic institution. Since, at our present point in history, it is very difficult to see how an economy of any complexity could function without making extensive use of markets, it would seem that a workable alternative to capitalism is simply beyond the imagination of any currently living person, at least in the Western world. This is a truly chastening thought.

## The Nature of Modernity

A more general point made by both Mullins and Mead concerns my evaluation of modern liberal society; both of them understand me to be harshly critical of it, and Mullins even detects what might be called an apocalyptic or millenarian note, that is an expectation of radically new social order rising on the ruins of liberalism. On this basis, he urges a greater appreciation of Polanyi's conception of a free society and liberal government. But my assessment of modernity is by no means negative; in both books, I acknowledge the dramatic improvement in material living conditions, and particularly the spectacular increase in life expectancy, as well as the greater degree of individual freedom, achieved during the modern age. My evaluation of modernity is rather that it is highly ambiguous: its legitimate achievements have been accompanied by disastrous failures. And this is because the modern worldview partly, but only partly, embodies the model of human agency implied in the biblical anthropology (or, as I put it in TS, modernity represents the biblical conception of human creativity in confused and distorted form.) And this in turn is the case because Christian theology and the institutional church never clearly grasped all the dimensions of the biblical understanding of human agency.

One formulation of the essence of modernity that I find quite appealing is that of Jürgen Habermas, who argues that the modern age is characterized by a tension between what he calls *communicative rationality*—that is, what has allowed science, parliamentary democracy, and other positive features of modernity to develop and flourish—and what he terms *subject-centered* reason, that is, the Enlightenment's misinterpretation of the Scientific Revolution as embodied in Cartesian and Kantian rationalism (which inevitably degenerate into Nietzschean nihilism) and which is practically manifested in various forms of reductionism, including both laissez-faire and statist political theories. Habermas argues that communicative rationality has never been

adequately theorized and sets such a theorization as his fundamental task.<sup>1</sup> It might be argued that Polanyi also holds such a view of modernity, although he never states it quite so explicitly. Like Habermas, he makes a distinction between the institutions and practices, found particularly in the English-speaking world, that have allowed science and ordered liberty (or freedom in the positive sense) to flourish, and the reductionist interpretations of these phenomena, characteristic of the continental Enlightenment, which lead inevitably to radical conceptions of freedom and thus to nihilism and ultimately totalitarianism. Furthermore, I believe Polanyi does a vastly better job of beginning to articulate the outlines of a communicative conception of rationality than Habermas, who, despite recognizing its origins in Christianity, ends up with a formulation that contains a distressing level of Enlightenment residue. But ultimately Polanyi has to admit that even English-speaking traditions have been corrupted by the Enlightenment and that classical liberalism is parasitical upon older social traditions and could never provide a workable basis for a free society.<sup>2</sup> And I would argue that this is because even the positive traditions that predate (and were misinterpreted by) the Enlightenment only partly embodied the biblical anthropology and the conception of rationality it implies.

This point leads to the broadest issue in TS, that of the ambiguous nature of the Christian tradition itself. In his third-last paragraph, Mead states that “I simply do not find Jardine persuasive in his attempt to include the specific doctrines of Nicaea—e.g., the specific relevance and virtues of Trinitarianism—as part of his argument.” What he is referring to is a discussion that I now regard as the weakest part of the book. Briefly, I first make the argument that the doctrine of the Trinity contributed crucially to the development of a greater sense of human agency in the Christian West, since it implies that the creative power of God can, as the Holy Spirit, act through human beings. I then argue that its formulation using Greek philosophical concepts may have contributed to later confusion and specifically to the tendency for a sense of human creativity to emerge in a distorted way in modernity. My point here is that in the biblical understanding, reality is dynamic, whereas the Greek philosophers conceived the world in essentially static terms, so that using Greek philosophical terminology, and particularly the concept of nature (actually more relevant to the Definition of Chalcedon than to the original Nicene doctrine itself) could tend to retard and thus possibly distort development of the implications of the biblical picture.

I would now say that this argument is not exactly wrong but is certainly too simplistic, even for a book intended for a general audience. After completing TS, I realized that I needed to read much more extensively in theology and have since done so. As a result of this reading, I would want to make three, admittedly still simple, but I think more adequate, formulations. First, the critical problem for Christian theology has been perhaps not so much its use of the concept of nature as its use of the particularly Greek, and therefore static, conception of nature. TS treats this issue quite crudely, simply discussing the essentially static conception of nature found in Aristotle, contrasting it with the dynamic picture of reality found in the Bible, and concluding that the two are completely incompatible, so that the introduction of the Greek concept into Christian theology was bound to cause confusion. It never considers the possibility that a dynamic concept of nature could be worked out. If this could be done, then, to consider just one possibility, a new conception of natural law, one which could be applied in a situation where the full extent of human agency has been recognized, could be developed. Some twentieth century theologians, such as Henri de Lubac, and in a different way, the Radical Orthodoxy school, have made an argument something like this, and indeed Lubac argues that Thomas Aquinas was in fact working on such a project but was later misinterpreted (which is why his positions are frequently regarded as not greatly different from those of Aristotle).

From this standpoint the problem, at least for Catholic theology, was the tendency of sixteenth-century neoscholastic theology to abandon the beginnings made by Aquinas and retreat to an essentially Aristotelean conception of nature. Lubac argues that the derangements of the French Enlightenment are primarily the result of this failure.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as noted above, my formulation in TS is not entirely incorrect but certainly much too crude.

A second, and I think even more interesting, line of thought has been developed by Colin Gunton, Robert Jenson, and several Eastern Orthodox theologians. On this view, modernity—or at least the negative features of modernity—is primarily the result of the failure of Christianity to follow up on the framework established at Nicaea and develop a truly Trinitarian theology. Beginning as early as St. Augustine, post-Nicene theology tended to focus primarily on the Father, only secondarily on the Son, and hardly at all on the Holy Spirit. Thus Christianity drifted toward a rather one-dimensional picture of God, conceiving of him primarily as creator—and as creating primarily, if not exclusively, through sheer, perhaps arbitrary, will; it tended to conceive of nature in static terms, as the product of a “one-shot” creative act, rather than an ongoing creation; and it was very slow to recognize fully the extent of human freedom implied in the Trinitarian formulation. These tendencies culminated in late medieval nominalism, which, with its proto-mechanistic conception of God’s action, set the stage for the mechanistic ontology that informs modernity, or, rather, that aspect of modernity characterized by Habermas as subject-centered reason.<sup>4</sup> Here again, my “static nature” formulation in TS is correct in some general sense but also quite vague.

A third approach can be found in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who claims that modernity has developed from the failure of Christianity to develop a proper theological aesthetics. Von Balthasar argues that the Greek philosophers properly recognized that Truth and Goodness cannot be understood apart from Beauty and therefore made a start on developing a theological aesthetics. Lacking Christian revelation and therefore an adequate conception of God, however, they made only minimal progress. Early and medieval Christian theology made significant strides toward this goal, but toward the end of the Middle Ages, Truth started to become detached from Beauty, leading eventually to the one-dimensional conception of knowledge characterizing the Enlightenment (and the one-dimensional utilitarian social order characterizing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois culture). This repression of the aesthetic dimension eventually resulted in its return, now completely separated from considerations of Truth and Goodness, in romanticism, which in turn led inevitably to the complete triumph, in utterly demonic form, of artistic creativity as the fundamental human capacity in Friedrich Nietzsche (and practically in both the fascist and expressive individualist movements of the twentieth century).<sup>5</sup>

## **Polanyi, Poteat, and the Theological Dimension**

Ultimately, I think the three theories just described could be understood as recognizing different dimensions of the same problem, although any possible synthesis would be far beyond the scope of this essay (or probably even a single-volume book project). But what is important for my purpose—and what has undoubtedly already occurred to the reader—is that several of the issues discussed above are clearly related to ideas found in Polanyi and Poteat.

The most obvious connection with Polanyi is of course von Balthasar’s analysis of theological aesthetics. Appreciation of beauty is central to Polanyi’s conception of truth, and it is quite possible that his

formulations could be very fruitfully applied to theology. But even more intriguing is the possibility that Polanyi's epistemology and implicit ontology could be applied to the question of the Holy Spirit. In SPP, I point out that

it appears that the only test of the validity of our present knowledge is its ability to lead us to new and unexpected knowledge, itself ultimately untestable unless and until it produces more new and unexpected knowledge . . . In other words, the implication of Polanyi's epistemology is that there can be no certain knowledge, at least in the sense that we normally think of certain knowledge, i.e., as something exhaustively specifiable. This is indeed the case, but it by no means implies that there can be no knowledge. In fact, in one sense it is this very uncertainty that allows knowledge to grow; our awareness that we are constantly relying upon pieces of an unsolved puzzle is part of what fuels our intellectual passions.

Somewhat more generally, it will be seen that when Polanyi says that we know more than we can say, and say more than we know, or that we rely on intimations of things we do not yet explicitly know, he is saying that our scientific theories and even our everyday utterances are overdetermined. This is true, but it by no means follows that this overdetermination is irrational or chaotic; indeed, it is our tacitly-grounded faith that it is not that allows us to pursue knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

I then go on to say that "Polanyi is actually making a very large ontological claim here." This "large ontological claim" could indeed be interpreted as an intimation, in non-theological terminology, of the action of the Holy Spirit, as I will now attempt to explain.

The fundamental idea in Polanyi's epistemology, that we tacitly know something before we explicitly know it, indicates that there must be some sense in which we "know" everything, that is some sense in which we are aware, however dimly, of the ultimate structure of reality. That is, in terms of the metaphor used above, that we are aware in some sense that the puzzle we are working on does indeed have a solution. Otherwise we could not trust our tacit acts of knowing. It is important to note that this fundamental experience underlies the Greek philosophical conception of reality as an ultimately unchanging cosmic order. If we attempt to define anything, we can only do so in terms of other things, and if we attempt to define those other things, we can only do so in terms of yet other things. . . so that in order to know anything, we must in some sense "know" everything. But we certainly know all sorts of things, so we must indeed somehow "know" everything. That is, there must be some kind of overarching cosmic structure, encompassing all beings, which we are somehow at least vaguely aware of.<sup>7</sup> It is also the source of the postmodernist denial of order, knowledge, and meaning. Since we don't know everything, we ultimately know nothing. But Polanyi takes this fundamental insight in a different direction: our reliance upon hidden clues and tacit sense of a solvable puzzle implies neither an ultimately unchanging cosmic order nor a meaningless chaos but rather a *process*. In the concluding section of *Personal Knowledge*, entitled "First Causes and Ultimate Ends," Polanyi paints a picture of a universe striving towards some ultimate but very dimly sensed goal:

So far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in man are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the strivings of myriad centres [of possible achievement] that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now

achieved by us up to this point. They are all akin to us. For all these centres—those which led up to our own existence and the far more numerous others which produced different lines of which many are extinct—may be seen engaged in the same endeavour towards ultimate liberation. We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own toward an unthinkable consummation.<sup>8</sup>

Taken out of context, this passage might be (mis)understood as indicating that this process is a rather disorderly, even random, affair. But certainly this is not Polanyi's position. He does see this process as having an order, or logic, to it. But it is Poteat who develops more fully what Polanyi seems to mean by this. Poteat claims that Polanyi's epistemology appears to be trying to articulate a kind of "temporal logic," that is, an ordering of reality in time rather than spatially. Using a phenomenology of speech and hearing (discussed in SPP) Poteat argues that it does make sense to talk about a kind of logic in time. This logic is not the rigid determination of conventional logic (which he argues is derived from visual experience) but rather a logic that sets limits to possible occurrences, even in a situation of infinite possibilities (or what he calls radical or absolute contingency). Poteat then argues that this idea of a temporal logic, which tacitly informs Polanyi's thought but is never explicitly worked out by him, is really what (again, tacitly) lies at the basis of the biblical picture of reality. More specifically, this temporal logic is essentially a more abstract conceptualization of what the ancient Hebrews understood as God's faithfulness.<sup>9</sup>

Here, however, is where Poteat's extension of Polanyi's analysis breaks down, or rather, comes up short. A theologian like Gunton, mentioned above, would say that Poteat has slipped into the one-dimensional picture of God that, as we discussed, has dominated Christian theology since the late Middle Ages, if not earlier, or at least that Poteat has not been able to take the next step and clearly distinguish God as Father or Creator, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. Specifically, the temporal logic that Poteat has identified with God's faithfulness probably corresponds to what in more conventional theological terms would be called the Holy Spirit, but he has not clearly differentiated the action of the Spirit from the action of the Creator. To fully unfold the theological and philosophical implications of Poteat's analysis of Polanyi would require the context of the Trinity.

If this analysis is correct, then we can draw at least two conclusions. First, the concepts developed by Polanyi and later Poteat could be extremely powerful tools for theological analysis; but second, those concepts must themselves be modified, or better, worked out more completely, in light of recent theological research. If this were done, however, some extremely exciting possibilities might be opened up, such as (just to mention a couple) articulating the concept of the Trinity in a way that would be intelligible to modern (or postmodern) people and developing what I above referred to as a dynamic concept of nature.

Obviously such a project is vastly beyond the scope of this brief response. But I hope I have been able to at least demonstrate how the weakest part of my analysis in TS could eventually point toward some tantalizing theoretical possibilities—a very Polanyian/biblical result.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); and *The*

*Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Boston: MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>Polanyi's main discussion of these issues is in *The Logic of Liberty* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951). See also the very helpful analysis, which examines the evolution of Polanyi's political views, in Struan Jacobs and Phil Mullins, "Faith, Tradition, and Dynamic Order: Michael Polanyi's Liberal Thought from 1941 to 1951," *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 120-131.

<sup>3</sup>Lubac's most important work, at least with regard to this issue, is probably *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1998). This book, originally published in 1965, is actually a revised version of *Surnaturel*, originally published in 1944 and yet to be translated into English. See also John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). Milbank is the best known theologian in the Radical Orthodoxy school. The best introduction to Radical Orthodoxy is probably James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Clark, 2003); and Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The best introduction to the debate within the Eastern Orthodox tradition is probably Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's, 1997), originally published in 1957.

<sup>5</sup>See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), originally published 1961-67; see especially Volume 1.

<sup>6</sup>Murray Jardine, *Speech and Political Practice: Recovering the Place of Human Responsibility* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup>See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), especially pp. 125-130.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 405.

<sup>9</sup>See William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), especially pp. 50-132. See also my discussion in *Speech and Political Practice*, pp. 103-126.