

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF WILLIAM H. POTEAT'S PHILOSOPHY



Murray Jardine

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ABSTRACT

Since World War II, political theory has increasingly focused on the question of the origins and nature of the modern age. William H. Poteat's explication of the Greek and Hebraic ontologies and his argument that modernity is the result of their incoherent combination in Christian theology can provide a framework to synthesize and extend the major competing theories about the modern era.

William H. Poteat's writings rarely focus directly on politics, but his philosophy nevertheless has very large implications for issues of political order. In this essay I will argue that Poteat's epistemological and ontological insights can be used to resolve several central issues in contemporary political theory. I will begin with a brief survey of those issues and then develop a tentative synthesis of several major recent political theorists. I will then show how Poteat's philosophy can clarify and extend that synthesis.

Political Theory and the Modern Age

Since the Second World War, Western political theory has increasingly focused on one question, namely the genesis and nature of the modern age. The modern era, usually regarded as beginning about the year 1500, has been characterized by scientific and technological advances that have dramatically improved human material well-being and by political reform and revolutionary movements that have attempted to establish greater individual freedom, so that modernity understands itself as the story

of human progress. But modern progress has been ambiguous in a number of ways. First, many of the same political theories that demanded greater freedom for Western people simultaneously rationalized European subjugation of other cultures. Modernity is very much the story of Western racism and imperialism. Second, at least some of the modern revolutionary movements dedicated to creating freedom instead turned into tyrannies much worse than anything seen in the premodern world. The modern age has produced both freedom and totalitarianism. Third, ever since the early nineteenth century, significant questions have been raised about whether the political and technological changes of the modern age really have increased human freedom; fears that humans have become slaves to their machines and that modern impersonal bureaucracies have become a kind of “administrative despotism” are now so commonplace that they have become staples of popular culture. Fourth, over the past few decades serious doubts have arisen about whether modern technological development is environmentally sustainable. The material progress of the modern era may turn out to be very short-lived. Finally, and most radically, the philosophical presuppositions of modernity, taken to their logical conclusion, appear to result in a thoroughgoing nihilism, recognized as early as the late nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche, emerging in spectacular practical terms in the insane slaughter of the twentieth century’s world wars, and now manifested more subtly in the self-destructive logic of postwar consumer culture.¹

As a consequence, since World War II, there has developed a substantial consensus among political theorists that the modern worldview definitively established by the Enlightenment is at least partly incoherent and thus has become morally, socially, and ecologically destructive. These theorists argue that alternative models of the relationships among humans and between humans and their environment must be developed. But developing alternatives to modernity requires understanding what, precisely, modernity is about. Hence the focus on the origins and essence of the modern age.

Although some political theorists, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, had expressed reservations about the trajectory of modern civilization during the nineteenth century, it was primarily in the aftermath of the First World War that a widespread perception of crisis emerged. The most important attempt to understand the essence of the modern era during this period was that of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger argues that early modern philosophy made a fatal mistake in attempting to ground knowledge in the human subject. Attempting to describe the structures of the mind that allow humans to receive a clear, objective “picture” of external reality leads inevitably to the conclusion that external reality is actually a creation of the mind. Consequently, modernity ends in a rampant subjectivism that reduces the world and even human beings to objects for technological exploitation and, in a final bizarre twist, regards even scientific knowledge as nothing but a human interpretation. Heidegger eventually traces the

subjectivist tendencies of modernity back to Plato's attempt to reduce the luxuriant multiplicity of reality to a finite, static cosmic structure. He ultimately recommends a re-articulation of the pre-philosophical pagan cosmos and a consequent displacement of humans from center stage in the universe as an alternative to the Western rationalist tradition. Heidegger's most direct influence is found in postmodernism, which gives his analysis an egalitarian interpretation that leads to the project of unmasking or "deconstructing" structures of authority as mere impositions of subjective power. But more broadly his work has provided, at least implicitly, the starting point for most subsequent attempts to understand the essence of the modern age.²

During and shortly after the Second World War several attempts were made to refine Heidegger's initial analysis. Perhaps the best-known of these is the argument of the Frankfurt school, as developed initially by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and later modified by Jürgen Habermas, that the essence of modernity is not so much subjectivism *per se* as the manner in which the modern age has conceptualized the subject, that is, in terms of instrumental rationality. Horkheimer and Adorno argue in effect that the rational subject could be a valid foundation for knowledge and political order if understood in a broader manner than that of the Enlightenment, which thought of the subject primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of its capacity for technical control of nature. Habermas has developed this analysis further by arguing that the modern age is characterized by a tension between what he calls communicative rationality and subject-centered reason. The former is his name for the capacity for intersubjective communication that has allowed science, parliamentary democracy, and other positive features of modernity to develop and flourish. The latter roughly corresponds to the instrumental rationalism identified by Horkheimer and Adorno. Habermas sees it as resulting from the Enlightenment's misinterpretation of the Scientific Revolution, as embodied in Cartesian and Kantian rationalism (both of which inevitably degenerate into Nietzschean nihilism), and as practically manifested in various forms of reductionism, including both *laissez-faire* and statist political theories. Habermas sees this formulation as an advance over the earlier Frankfurt school in that it isolates two different moments, one positive and one negative, of modern thought. He thinks that communicative rationality has never been adequately theorized and sets such a theorization as his fundamental task.³

Several later theories broadened the scope of inquiry beyond that of Heidegger and the Frankfurt school by regarding modern subjectivism as essentially derivative from more general ontological conceptions. Heidegger's student Leo Strauss, at least in one possible interpretation, sees subjectivism as a logical consequence of the mechanistic ontology first articulated by Thomas Hobbes and Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century. For Strauss, the human desires which form the basis for modern conceptions of natural rights, understood by Hobbes as products of mechanical causation, are

exposed by Jean Jacques Rousseau—simply working out the logical implications of Hobbes's own ontology—as human social constructions. As Rousseau's insight is later taken to *its* logical conclusion by Nietzsche, even early modernity's mechanical universe becomes nothing but a human creation. Strauss urges a recovery of the classical Greek ontology as an alternative to the inevitably nihilistic mechanistic metaphysics of the Enlightenment.⁴

Although Strauss sees modernity as making an explicit break with premodern ontology, most subsequent political theorists have urged that modernity's origins tend to lie in the medieval era, that is to say, in Christianity. Karl Löwith (another student of Heidegger) and Eric Voegelin have posited that the political movements of the modern age could be best understood as immanentized versions of Christian eschatological expectations. The modern era is essentially a series of ever more violent revolutions attempting to establish heaven on earth. Löwith tends to follow Strauss in seeing something like Platonism as an alternative to the secularized Christian millenarianism of modernity. Voegelin, by contrast, regards Christianity as having achieved greater spiritual truth than the Greek philosophers, but sees early Christian theology as making a fatal mistake in regarding revelation as closed with Christ, rather than admitting the possibility of further revelations beyond Christ. Preparing for further revelations would have given spiritual meaning to the Christian societies that developed during the Middle Ages, but the Church's closure of revelation meant that Western spiritual energy would be increasingly directed toward this world, ultimately resulting in modernity's perfectionist (or as Voegelin terms them, gnostic) political movements. This analysis leads him to something like a kind of process theology as an alternative to orthodox Christian doctrine.⁵

Finally, another position, taken recently by Michael Gillespie and others, finds the origins of modernity in late medieval nominalism. Essentially, Gillespie argues that during the Reformation and in the earliest more-or-less secular political theories the nominalist conception of God as pure, unrestricted, irresistible will was transferred both into humans, thus generating the subjectivism of modernity, and into nature, thus resulting in the mechanistic ontology of modernity. Like Strauss, Gillespie tends to see a revival of Platonism, or more precisely a kind of Platonized Christianity, as an alternative to modernity.⁶

Even such a cursory examination of the development of political theory in the postwar era shows clearly that the major theories increasingly point toward theological issues, and indeed several of the analyses discussed above actually finger Christianity as the culprit in the modern scenario. Voegelin sees modernity as resulting from Christianity's (mistaken) belief that revelation is closed while Gillespie sees the pure will of the nominalist God as a direct implication of the biblical worldview. As it happens, recent theologians, like political theorists, have focused considerable energy on the

issue of modernity's origins, perhaps not so much from political considerations but in an attempt to understand the collapse of Western Christian culture since the late eighteenth century. These theological analyses indicate that the political theories discussed above are correct in seeing modernity as derivative from Christianity but tend to have a somewhat simplistic understanding of the theological issues involved—although these limitations do actually point to areas where historic Christian theology has been incoherent and needs to be reconstructed.

The centrality of theological issues for any understanding of modernity becomes clear when it is realized that Heidegger's argument—that the essence of modernity is subjectivism—was actually more or less anticipated by Karl Barth in his critique of liberal Protestantism. In his shattering post-World War I work *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921), Barth takes liberal theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher to task for focusing on the human subject and its interior religious consciousness rather than on God's word, which originates outside the subject. Heidegger's analysis from the 1930s could even be described as a kind of neo-pagan version of Barth, applied to ancient and modern philosophy, although there does not appear to be any evidence of a direct influence.⁷

About a generation after Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr developed an interpretation of the modern age that broadened his argument into something similar to the theories of Voegelin and Lowith. Niebuhr sees the idea of progress and its denial of human sinfulness as the essence of modernity and sees modern notions of progress as developing from the overly benign view of human nature that resulted from the medieval synthesis of Greek and biblical anthropologies. The ancient Greek philosophers had a high estimate of the human capacity for virtue (at least for a philosophical elite) but a low estimate of overall human capabilities, seeing humans as having only a minimal ability to affect their environment. The biblical authors had a much greater sense of human agency but had a very low view of human virtue, seeing that agency as corrupted by sin. The medieval synthesis of these two views, which tended to retain the greater biblical sense of human agency but downplayed the destructive effects of sin, eventually led to the Renaissance view of humans as having tremendous abilities to change the world and the virtue to do so successfully, leading to modern progressivism and ultimately millenarianism.⁸

The Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac can be read as developing a partial insight achieved by Niebuhr and thereby beginning to clarify the nature of modernity in the Catholic world. An obvious criticism of Niebuhr's argument is that while it does have a certain conceptual plausibility it doesn't fit the historical facts well, as modern culture developed more completely in the Protestant countries than in the Catholic world, so that it seems strange to locate the origins of modernity in Catholicism. Niebuhr's analysis seems conceptually plausible because it is based on a once-conventional

interpretation of Thomas Aquinas's position on nature, grace, and sin. Aquinas is usually presented as having argued that God created humans with a pure, essentially Aristotelean nature, and then added a "supernatural gift" to give humans a higher nature than other beings. As Niebuhr understands Aquinas, only the supernatural gift is lost or corrupted through original sin, so that an uncorrupted pure nature still remains. Human nature can then be conceived as perfectible, leading to the semi-Pelagianism of Catholic theology and the full-blown Pelagianism of the Renaissance and modernity. Lubac argues, however, that the idea of a pure nature and supernatural addition is not found in Aquinas but rather emerged through the neo-scholastic (mis)interpretation of his writings that heavily influenced the Council of Trent. Aquinas, according to Lubac, thought that God created humans with a radically different nature than other beings, one capable of a supernatural end, with nature and grace not as readily separable as the neo-scholastic interpretation implies, and thus also with no possibility of a pure nature uncorrupted by sin (and therefore capable of this-worldly perfection). The anthropological formulation seen by Niebuhr as the precursor of modern progressivism did not actually emerge until after the Renaissance and Reformation and therefore could not have influenced early Protestant culture. As I will discuss below, however, it could explain modern tendencies in the Catholic world.⁹

A more recent position, held by Robert Jenson, Colin Gunton, and several theologians from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, is that the origins of modernity can be found in the failure of Christianity to develop a truly Trinitarian theology.¹⁰ Here I will focus on Gunton, who presents the most straightforward version of this analysis. In his view theology after the Council of Nicaea failed to work out the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity, focusing 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 as an ongoing process; and it was very slow to recognize fully the extent of human freedom implied in the Trinitarian formulation. This meant that as a greater sense of human agency developed in the early modern era, it tended to be conceptualized as pure will (the model of God's agency) and it tended to be increasingly seen as in competition with the apparently arbitrary will of God. Thus modernity is characterized by an increasingly radical assertion of human will, resulting in (as with Heidegger) the reduction of nature and even humans themselves to objects of technical manipulation.

Gunton argues that the dilemmas of modernity can be resolved by working out the critical implication of the Trinitarian model: that God exists in harmonious plurality. The Western philosophical and theological tradition, thanks to Plato, has an overpowering tendency to see plurality as conflictual and order as possible only through unity. This tendency is why post-Nicene theology, beginning with Augustine, tended

to reduce the Trinity to the person of the Father. But the harmonious plurality of the Trinity means that the Holy Spirit, in perfecting creation, brings about what Gunton calls “the realization of particularity,” from which we finally conclude that the particularity of created beings is established by the particularity at the heart of the being of the Creator. This leads to a relational understanding of the world, where beings are understood in terms of their relationship to God and others. Politically, then, a truly Trinitarian theology would imply that humans attempt to work out and put in practice a truly relational approach to each other and the natural world. This would imply a politics that, while allowing and indeed encouraging human freedom, would understand that freedom is a more subtle matter than is generally understood in present-day liberal individualist societies, and that in particular, true freedom is possible only within the context of community. Similarly, it would result in a new understanding of the human relation to nature, one that could mean a new type of technology, or rather, new forms of economic production, that would be environmentally sustainable but still allow a reasonable level of material prosperity for all.

A Preliminary Synthesis

At this point in the analysis, I think three conclusions can be at least tentatively drawn. First, it is likely that the modern age has its origins in historic Christian culture, since all of the apparent features of modernity taken as essential by various theorists—subjectivism, mechanism, progressivism—can be traced to issues in Christianity. One could discern a line of thought from the Reformation and neo-scholasticism to the materialistic rationalism of the Enlightenment and thence to the aesthetic or neo-pagan irrationalism of late modernity. Indeed, it is probably correct to say that modern civilization is a (confused) Christian civilization: all of the early figures of the Enlightenment saw themselves as Christians, and full-blown secularism is a relatively late development.¹¹ But if modern political theories are incoherent and ultimately nihilistic, then classical Christian theology must also have been incoherent in some way, and indeed this is the conclusion theologians themselves have generally drawn.

Second, as already discussed, the modern age is probably best understood as ambiguous in nature. Here a fairly clear evolution can be discerned. Most of the earliest attempts by philosophers and theologians (such as Heidegger, Strauss, Voegelin, and Niebuhr) to understand the nature of modernity saw it as uniformly negative, as an inexorable slide from the naive rationalism of the Enlightenment to nihilism and technological world war. But this picture is certainly too simple. Modernity does seem to have some legitimate accomplishments, most notably in the dramatic improvement in the material conditions of life that it has brought about, and particularly in the spectacular increase in life expectancy over the past 200 years. A more nuanced interpretation of the modern age can be found in the work of more recent theorists.

Habermas, as noted above, would be the obvious example, but Gillespie, Gunton, and others have also indicated that the modern worldview appears to have at least partly captured important truths about nature and human agency that premodern philosophy and theology could not. This is also the position held by both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and indeed appears to be the position of Poteat's mentor, Michael Polanyi.¹²

Third, an examination of the various theories of modernity tends to indicate that not only is modernity not all evil, it is also not monolithic. That is, modern thought and modern civilization have developed differently in different areas of the Western world. The tendency toward subjectivism is probably strongest in Germany, and indeed this is probably why Heidegger saw it as the essence of modernity and why Habermas also conceptualized modernity in terms of the subject. Conversely, the mechanistic ontology of modernity is clearly most prominent in the English-speaking world, and indeed, as I shall argue below, probably derives from the powerful influence of Calvinism there. Finally, the trajectory of modernity in the Catholic world seems to be significantly different and is probably best captured by Lubac, as will be explained below.

With these observations as a starting point, I will now sketch out a rough synthesis of the theories discussed above, in preparation for a final synthesis facilitated by Poteat's analysis. Accepting that modernity is ambiguous, and assuming that the positive aspects of modernity have their origins in Christianity (a claim I will demonstrate using Poteat), I will focus on the negative dimensions of modern thought and the modern age. I think Gunton is correct in arguing that the key issue is Christianity's inability to develop a truly Trinitarian theology. From this comes the tendency, as discussed above, to understand God as pure will, a tendency that reaches its logical conclusion in nominalism. The Reformation's attempts to come to grips with the implications of nominalism appear to lead directly to both the mechanistic tendencies of modern English-speaking thought and German subjectivism.

Calvin is the key link for the English speaking world, as he pushes the logic of nominalism to its final conclusion. For him the nominalist conception of God means that the universe must ultimately be predetermined by God's will, a conclusion most obviously manifest in his doctrine of predestination. Hobbes, in effect, merely reconceptualizes Calvin's predetermined universe by making God do less work: God's will, instead of directly determining every occurrence in the world, simply creates the mathematical laws that define the mechanical forces that determine every occurrence in the world, leading to the modern English-speaking picture of nature and its political, economic, and social embodiment, liberal capitalism. Luther is the critical figure in Germany. His attempt to understand how human will submits to God's will leads directly to the obsession with the subject (individual or collective) found in Kant,

Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, and therefore to Heidegger's assessment that subjectivism is the essence of modernism.

The situation in the Catholic world, in which modern culture has been less clearly defined as in the Protestant countries, is somewhat more complicated, but again Gunton can provide the starting point. Recall that, according to Gunton, in addition to conceiving of God as pure will, the Western theological tradition has also tended to conceive of nature as essentially static (or, as conceptualized earlier, as God's creation as a single event rather than an ongoing process), that is, as not necessarily all that different from Aristotle's static natural cosmos. Lubac's analysis implies that, in effect, Aquinas's conception of human nature and grace was able to move at least somewhat away from this stasis, but that it was restored, or rather transformed, by the neo-scholastic misinterpretation of Aquinas which posited a pure nature, entirely independent of grace, thus setting the stage for the "autonomous nature"—autonomous in the sense of being completely independent of God—of modernity. For Lubac it is the tendency to see humans and the world as autonomous from God that is more central to modernity than the perfectability emphasized by Niebuhr. Thus within the Catholic world, modern political theories and movements have been less tied to a mechanistic conception of nature than their Anglo-American counterparts, and less concerned with the structure of the subject than in Germany, but rather tend to focus on establishing a purely secular, that is, autonomous in Lubac's sense, social order. And indeed Lubac's analysis can even explain the differing tendencies of France and southern Europe in the modern age. The neo-scholastic conception of pure nature could lead to an autonomous and possibly perfectible nature or to an essentially Aristotelian nature with a Christian veneer. The former would characterize France and the latter could describe the much less dynamic societies of Spain and Italy, at least until relatively late in the modern age. Finally, Lubac's conception could account for the fact that whereas secularization in the Protestant world took place gradually, because the dominant conceptions of nature and human agency were only slight modifications of earlier theological formulations, secularism in the Catholic world attempted a much sharper break with existing pre- and early modern institutions.

Finally, we can now consider the issue of progress or perfectionism which Voegelin, Lowith, and Niebuhr see as central to modernity. As noted above, given the successes of modernity in raising material living standards and breaking down arbitrary bloodline-based social hierarchies ultimately derived from the ancient pagan world, it could be reasonable to speak of modern societies as achieving progress—at least in a tentative way, since we can never be sure of the long term consequences of our actions. From this standpoint, the utopian political movements that have punctuated modern history could be seen, not as the essential feature of the modern age, but rather as overenthusiastic reactions to the legitimate successes of modernity—and indeed perhaps as being

provoked by the inability of earlier Christian theological formulations to admit the possibility of modest progress.

Using Gunton's analysis as a basic framework, then, we have been able to make a rough synthesis of the main interpretations of modernity. In order to complete this synthesis, however, it is necessary to examine Poteat's understanding of the modern age.

Poteat on Modernity

Poteat does not discuss the issue of the nature and genesis of modernity in a highly systematic way; his observations on this issue tend to be embedded in broader analyses of logical, ontological, and epistemological issues, and sometimes are only implicit in those discussions. But we can say that Poteat sees modernity, most broadly, as an outcome of the incoherent medieval synthesis of Greek and Hebraic thought. This sounds like Niebuhr but, as we will quickly see, Poteat's analysis is quite different. Whereas Niebuhr sees the medieval conflation of Greek and biblical anthropologies as the source of modernity's overly benign view of human nature and progressive ideologies, Poteat's argument is considerably more complex and focuses on the ontological level. Specifically, Poteat argues that the (implicit) ontology of the ancient Hebrews more correctly describes the fundamental structure of reality than that of the Greek philosophers, and was thus distorted by the application of Greek ontological concepts in Christian theology.¹³ What, then, is the difference between the Greek and Hebraic ontologies?

As a first approximation, Poteat can be understood to say that the Greek philosophical model of reality is drawn primarily from visual experience, while the Hebraic model of reality is drawn primarily from oral/aural experience. Somewhat more specifically, Poteat argues that the Greek philosophical conception of reality is heavily shaped by the experience of literacy. Here he draws upon the extensive literature from anthropologists, psychologists, literary critics, and others about the differences between oral and literate cultures. This literature draws a sharp distinction between premodern cultures in which only a small percentage of the population is literate and modern societies in which, thanks to the printing press, most people have at least basic reading and writing skills. It argues that modern literate cultures are much more visually oriented (since written communication primarily or exclusively engages one's eyes) while premodern oral cultures (communicating primarily through speech) are much more attuned to hearing. This has many critical phenomenological implications, as visual experience is quite different from oral/aural experience. A further critical difference between these cultures is that oral cultures typically think in highly personal terms (since communication in such cultures normally involves actually talking directly to another person) while literate cultures generally think in more impersonal terms (since literate communication generally involves reading impersonal texts). Finally, the ability to perform

abstract analysis is greatly improved by literacy. It is much easier to dissect an argument when one can look at it whole, as a written page allows, than when it is being spoken. Oral cultures have only a very limited capacity for analytical thought, at least in the sense that the Western philosophical tradition has conceived it. This difference has a further important implication: oral cultures tend to express ideas in poetic and narrative terms, while literate cultures are more likely to employ logical argumentation.¹⁴

The classical age of Greece represents a special case in this analysis. Writers on oral-literate differences point out that the invention of the Greek alphabet allowed for a significant expansion of literacy even without the printing press. The Greek alphabet is much easier to learn than such complicated systems as hieroglyphics or even the Semitic alphabet (which does not indicate vowels) so that most male members of the upper classes could achieve substantial literacy, thus allowing for a “critical mass” necessary for the formation of a literate culture, with a greater capacity for analytical thought. The Greek philosophers were products of this earliest literate culture.¹⁵

Poteat argues that the Greek philosophers conceived of reality on the model of a written text: the universe is characterized by a (large but ultimately) finite set of possibilities which could, in principle, be exhaustively described as derivative from some fundamental, impersonal principle of order, and words get their meaning by corresponding to particular aspects of the ultimately atemporal, non-developmental structure that constitutes reality. The Greeks certainly did not *explicitly* use the written text as their model of reality—indeed, Plato explicitly deemed writing to be inferior to speech—but, Poteat argues, the experience of living in a relatively literate environment motivated them *tacitly* to draw upon the static and impersonal characteristics of the written word when formulating their conception of the world.

The Hebrews, by contrast, conceived of reality on the model of a spoken word, as illustrated by the first chapter of Genesis or the beginning of the Gospel of John. The universe is thus dynamic, as spoken words are when they issue from the mouth of a person, and personal, since spoken words always issue from the mouth of particular persons. Words do not simply label things that already exist but actually create and transform things, meaning that there is the possibility of real novelty, and from this it follows that the Hebraic universe, unlike the Greek universe, has infinite possibilities, or stated differently, is much more radically contingent. God is the paradigmatic personal speaker, or as Poteat puts it, the ever-faithful speaker, who speaks the world into existence and who keeps his promises.

Poteat’s argument then, could be described (again, as we shall see shortly, only as a first approximation) as saying that Western thought since the Middle Ages has been characterized by a kind of “parallax” created by the incoherent mixture of these two very different models in Christianity. To be sure, visual experience has (due to the printing press) been predominant in the modern age, but the subordinate elements of

the Hebraic oral/aural model do bring about the result that the specifically modern visual consciousness is quite different from that of the Greek philosophers.

One objection that might be raised at this point is that although the differences between oral and literate mentalities might explain the differences between the literate culture of classical Greece and the oral culture of ancient Israel, they do not really explain the differences between Israel and its pagan neighbors, which were also, of course, oral cultures. And indeed a closer reading of Poterat indicates that ultimately he goes beyond the initial analysis deriving from the literature on oral and literate cultures: his final conclusion is that orality and literacy are ultimately not decisive but only contributing factors in the differences between Greek and Hebraic worldviews. The Greeks, he argues, ultimately took the growth and decay of natural fertility and the revolutions of the heavenly bodies as their model of order in the world, as indeed all pagan cultures did; the Greek philosophers merely reconceptualized this model in the abstract, impersonal manner characteristic of literate thought. The Hebrews, by contrast, took as their model of order the actions of a paradigmatic personal speaker, one always faithful to his word. The decisive difference between Greek and Hebraic metaphysics lies in their primordial models of reality.

Poterat's analysis of the genesis of modernity can now be restated roughly as follows: the full development of the implications of the Hebraic worldview was thwarted by the over reliance upon Greek philosophical concepts, perhaps not so much during the development of basic Christian doctrines in late antiquity as during the Middle Ages, specifically in that the static, impersonal concepts of Greek metaphysics could not allow Western philosophy and theology to make sense of the dynamic, personal picture of reality actually at the core of Christianity.

More specifically, Poterat argues that one can talk about both "visual" and "oral/aural" logics. The visual logic developed by the Greek philosophers essentially considers the eternal relations between static entities (that is, entities conceived on the model of a written word existing statically on a page); in this logic a necessary relation cannot coexist with contingency. On this model, then, reality can have only finite possibilities, as noted above. But the oral/aural logic which he claims is implicit in the Hebraic picture of reality can, because of its basis in the dynamism of the speech act, allow for the coexistence of necessity and contingency.¹⁶ Thus the world can be radically contingent upon God but still subject to necessity—the necessity of his faithfulness. Another way to state this is that, for Poterat, or rather for the oral-aural logic Poterat attempts to explicate, limits can still exist even in a situation of infinite possibilities.

It should be noted here that Poterat is not arguing that there is something "wrong" with the Greek visual logic; he is simply saying that it has significant limitations. It is the appropriate tool for certain types of problems, such as those found in mathematics, dealing with the eternal relations of static entities. But it is inappropriate and perhaps

even dangerous when applied to other types of issues, such as ontological structure of the world. A more conventional way to state this could be that the Greek philosophers' major mistake was in conflating logical and ontological categories. They (mis)took the visually derived logic appropriate to certain types of static relations as a general description of reality.

In any case, modernity, then, for Poteat, is the end result of a process in which Western culture becomes more aware of the contingency implied by the biblical understanding of God's action but is unable to conceptualize any limits on that contingency because the concept of necessity inherited from the Greeks cannot be reconciled with contingency—eventually leading to the limitless contingency, that is the nihilism, of late modernity. To put it another way, medieval thought lacked the tools necessary to conceptualize order amidst contingency, eventually leaving only the absolute contingency of a world subject to arbitrary will. The development of a fully literate (that is visual) culture following the invention of the printing press simply accelerated this process, as the conceptual resources of the Hebraic oral-culture capable of addressing this problem (heretofore not fully comprehended) became largely inaccessible to the Western mind.

Although Poteat does not address this issue explicitly, his analysis can also explain the ambiguous nature of modernity. Modernity “works” to the extent that the Hebraic model is dominant, as, for example, in actual scientific practice as explicated by Polanyi; it fails to the extent that the Greek model informs attempts to understand phenomena such as science, wealth creation, and democracy. On Poteat's analysis, then, what is needed to escape the nihilism of late modernity is a more complete explication of the dynamic oral/aural logic implicit in the Hebraic worldview and its application to philosophical, theological, ethical, and political issues. This would serve to separate more clearly the positive and negative aspects of modernity.

Poteat's Analysis as the Linchpin for a Final Synthesis

With this description of Poteat's (implicit) analysis of the origins and nature of modernity, we can now complete the synthesis of the major theories of modernity begun earlier. First, Poteat's explication of the Hebraic worldview is the key to my claim that the positive features of modernity derive from Christianity. The picture of nature as a contingent creation of a paradigmatic speaker and ordered by that speaker's faithfulness is the conceptual basis for modern abductive, experimental science, as opposed to the deductive (and thus much less powerful) science of the Greek philosophers. The contingency of the world means that there can be no eternally-existing natural essences of the kind that define Greek deductive science, only worldly appearances, while God's faithfulness guarantees that the apparent order of those worldly appearances can be trusted to a much greater extent than Plato or even Aristotle could have imagined, and

those appearances can be used to find general principles which could be thought of as articulations of specific elements of order in the Hebraic oral/aural logic.¹⁷ Similarly, since each human being is a unique, contingent creature of God, created by the unconditional love that is a manifestation of oral/aural order, modern notions of freedom and equality can gradually break down the bloodline-based hierarchies (that is the hierarchies based on natural fertility, taken to be unchangeable) of the ancient world.¹⁸

Certain of the negative features of the modern world can now also be understood more clearly. Modernity's mechanistic ontology essentially pictures reality as radically contingent without the covenant order of God's faithfulness but rather only the necessity of a kind of reductive static natural order, that is the necessity provided by eternally-existing mathematical laws. The Hebraic ontology, or rather a more fully worked-out version of it, would have recognized that Newtonian physics is an interpretation of only one aspect of reality, not a literal description of the entire cosmos, which would have a multifaceted structure ultimately ordered by God's faithfulness. Similarly, modernity's subjectivism sees humans as embodying the creative capacity of the paradigmatic speaker without the limitations derived from that speaker's faithfulness.

Further, moderate notions of social progress, which would appear to be tentatively warranted by the real successes of modernity, could be understood as a consequence of the oral/aural logic posited by Poteat, as humans gain a greater understanding of God's creation and use that understanding to better their condition. And, as already noted, the overenthusiastic attempts to accelerate this legitimate progress into projects to achieve heaven on earth could be understood as reactions to the refusal on the part of orthodox Christian establishments to recognize the possibility of real progress, itself caused by Christian theology's failure to articulate the logic of the Hebraic worldview.

More generally, it would appear that what Poteat calls the oral/aural logic of God's covenant order corresponds to what Gunton calls the action of the Son and particularly the Spirit. Poteat's ever faithful speaker is clearly the Father, or Creator, and from a Trinitarian standpoint one might think that Poteat has fallen into the historic Western theological trap of conceiving of God in one-dimensional terms, thus eventually making the world a radically contingent, and therefore potentially chaotic, product of his unrestrained will. But the oral/aural logic developed by Poteat prevents this from happening. The clear implication of Gunton's theology is that we must articulate how the Spirit realizes harmonious particularity, and Poteat's oral/aural logic indicates how this could be done, that is, by working out more fully the logic inherent in the speech-act within community in accordance with that logic.

Toward a Truly Postmodern Politics

A concrete example of the theoretical situation described above would in fact be the most successful of modern societies, that is, the English-speaking societies. At one

level, the political theory informing those societies is the liberalism of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes sees society as a collection of essentially independent, and potentially antagonistic, individuals, who pursue their own goals subject to legal limitations, designed to maintain peace and order, established by government—a picture of social order that takes the economic market as its model and is clearly derived from the mechanistic ontology of modernity that in turn represents a distorted version of the biblical ontology. The inevitable result of that liberalism is the utter dominance of monopolized capitalist markets and the centralized state. But in actual practice, the mechanistic secularized Protestant liberalism that informs the English-speaking societies has been greatly ameliorated by their parliamentary and republican traditions of self-government, the more limited (or embedded, in Karl Polanyi's terms) markets of local commerce, and the vigorous associational life noted by Tocqueville in his American travels—all of which would seem to be examples of the harmonious particularity that Gunton sees as the work of the Spirit. Thus the English-speaking societies represent the fundamental tension of modernity—the gradual working out of the logic of God's covenant, in Poteat's terms, or the gradual reception of the action of the Holy Spirit, in Gunton's terms, distorted by the effects of the residues of Greek ontology, reinforced experientially by the heavily visual orientation resulting from print literacy.

As discussed earlier, it seems to me that the most powerful of the approaches discussed in the first section of this essay is the argument that Western theology failed to develop an adequate understanding of the Trinity, as it provides the basic framework for the preliminary synthesis worked out in the second section, but that synthesis cannot be made truly complete or convincing without either the critical explication of the experiential basis of the Greek, Hebraic, and modern worldviews or the more concrete articulation of the action of the Spirit provided by Poteat. Thus, as indicated in the section heading, Poteat's analysis provides the linchpin for a successful synthesis of the numerous attempts to understand the nature of modernity that have been undertaken in the postwar world.

Finally, the argument provided here is of course only a sketch and would require a book-length treatment to be fully convincing. But I believe it has shown, in broad outline, why Poteat's philosophy, even though it rarely addresses political issues explicitly, provides the key to understanding, and thus eventually resolving, the political crisis of the late modern world.

ENDNOTES

¹Entirely aside from environmental issues, current consumer capitalist society is digging its own grave with unsustainably low birth rates and unsustainably high debt levels. Fertility rates in virtually all Western countries are currently far below the replacement level, that is the level necessary to maintain a stable population, so that, absent immigration, Western societies will suffer declining populations and eventually disappear. As a matter of logic, immigration cannot solve this problem because if immigrants assimilate to current Western cultural norms they will quit having children, and if they don't, they will eventually become the dominant population and thus the dominant culture. The latter scenario is the great fear of various contemporary nationalist movements, particularly in Europe, but available evidence indicates that the former scenario is far more likely, and indeed, as Western consumer culture has spread elsewhere, birthrates in the global south have dropped precipitously over the past generation, so that immigration to Western countries has largely dried up. The real danger of a declining population is not so much literal disappearance of a society but rather that, at least under modern conditions, a declining population is also an aging population, so that eventually societies with very low birth rates will suffer disastrous economic conditions caused by an unsustainable ratio of retired people to working-age people. (Most pension plans in the Western world are already effectively bankrupt.) This situation is exacerbated by the absurd levels of consumer debt accumulated in Western societies over the past generation. These issues have been discussed in considerable detail by demographers and economists but, astonishingly, have received little attention in the mainstream media. See Peter G. Peterson, *Gray Dawn: How the Coming Age Wave Will Transform America—And the World* (New York: Random House, 1999); Phillip Longman, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What To Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Ben J. Wattenberg, *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future* (Np: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 2004); and Laurence J. Kotlikoff and Scott Burns, *The Coming Generational Storm: What You Need to Know about America's Economic Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

²Heidegger's definitive analysis of modernity can be found in *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism*, trans. David Ferrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991), derived from various lectures and writings in the 1930s and 1940s.

³See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), originally published in 1944. Habermas's original formulation of his thesis is in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); for later versions see *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).

⁴See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

⁵See Karl Löwith, *Reason in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) and Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

⁶See Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁷See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London Oxford University Press, 1933), originally published in 1921.

⁸See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), originally published in 1941.

⁹See Henri de Lubac, *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.

¹⁰See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Gunton's most important work is *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹¹Leszek Kolakowski has argued that Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism declined more-or-less simultaneously, precisely because they are very closely related. See "God in a Godless Time," *First Things* (<https://www.firstthings.com/issue/2003/06/junejuly>) and *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹²See Carson Holloway, *The Way of Life: John Paul II and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008) and Thomas R. Rourke, *The Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011). Polanyi discusses these issues in both *The Logic of Liberty* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1951) and *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

¹³The following discussion is derived from William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

¹⁴The basic textbook in the field is Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), which includes a complete bibliography of the literature in this field.

¹⁵See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963).

¹⁶This is a rather complicated argument that space does not allow me even to summarize here; see *Polanyian Meditations*, chapters IV-VII.

¹⁷See M. B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," *Mind* 43 (1934): 447-468 for a more detailed discussion.

¹⁸Poteat discusses this issue in a variety of contexts; see especially *Polanyian Meditations*, chapter VII-VIII.