

REFLECTIONS OF A WHITE GHETTO PREACHER ON THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF DR. WILLIAM H. POTEAT



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ABSTRACT

W.H. Poteat's critique is that the Western white way of knowing, "gone mad on Descartes," led to the corruption of Western culture. The author was inspired by his personal relationship with Poteat and the resonance of Poteat's teaching—"The whole thing must be rethought"—with Howard Thurman's corresponding account of a culture profaned by slavery in need of transformed relationships—"We are made for each other." Consequently, the author entered a 40-year career as a white minister and Preacher at the (Black) St. Mark Union congregation in Kansas City, Mo.

In his book, *There Is a River*, Vincent Harding addresses the question of the struggle between the white abolitionist and the Black abolitionist:

The significance of the differences between the black and white antislavery workers became most apparent when members of the two groups faced each other in common tasks in the North. Many of the black abolitionists had been captives in the South, and had made the courageous inner break with the system of white domination, and now presented something other than the popular image of the humble, grateful slave. Because many of the white abolitionists

usually had no desire to know, in the best sense of the word a truly free black man or woman, tensions and conflicts inevitably developed between them. Since many white abolitionists assumed that they were to be the saviors of the American society and its black underclass, they often treated their black co-workers with patronizing disdain at worst (or was awestruck idolatry the worst?) or at best as almost equal but clearly subservient allies of their white-defined cause (Harding 1982, 127).

In order to get at the problem of “patronizing disdain” and “awestruck idolatry” white people must be in relationship with the people who can best recognize the sin when it arises. In order for this to happen Black folks must feel from white people a sense of mutual trust and not temporary alliance, which ultimately means white domination.

The lines of division still exist between African-Americans and liberal European-Americans. The power of domination and white superiority finds itself in the refusal of the possibility of relationship between equals. White progressives assume the role of savior because the savior is powerful and knows all, and in a society that worships rationality as the God of knowledge, they retain control because the majority of white culture still believes Black folks aren't educated. Overlooked is the vast body of knowledge that comes through intuition and feelings. Einstein, one of the most prominent symbols of European educated scientific genius, was aware of this (See Barrett 1950).

At Duke, I met my first real mentor: Dr. William H. Poteat. He still remains as close to me as a thought, and we used to communicate by phone several times a year. What he taught has stood the test of time. When so much that I was exposed to in academia was like building my house on sand, his teachings have been like the rock. Winds and storms have not eroded them. If anything they are stronger and clearer because of the storms. He represents one of the few times the word from a white academician was to me the truth.

His classes were filled with vitality as he allowed us to challenge and argue his positions. He reached out and touched you and what you knew and asked for it right there in class. He wasn't looking for abstractions of what you knew. He wanted you fully present as a person and he wanted to know how you knew.

I remember the final chapel meditation that he gave to the Duke Divinity School class of 1964. He tried to convey that truth is not some beatific vision that brings with it beauty and pleasure. No, on the contrary, for Poteat catastrophe always accompanied the discovery of truth: “A deeper human sensibility has known that truth is not only won at a price, but painful when won; that knowledge is always an ambiguous good, concealing a threat; that catastrophe is associated with loss of innocence” (Poteat 1966, 280).

He was giving voice to a new “Lord” I was experiencing. He was replacing the lies I had been told in my youth. He met difficulty head on and said it was a part of the equation, and not only a part but a necessary part. He didn’t offer me the convenient out of conventional piety. He offered me himself and a willingness to relate. He knew about Calvary and “*Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?*” He told me that even God hurt. Poteat was telling me about the “brooding presence” that Thurman would clarify for me later.

Even though I never met Howard Thurman, his writings are integral to the questions that Poteat raised for me. I came upon Howard Thurman through one of his students and my close friend, Dr. Mac Charles Jones. Dr. Thurman’s input is equally as profound as Poteat’s as he carried Poteat’s questions into answers. These two souls, one the grandchild of slaves looking for his freedom, and the other the child of privilege looking for his soul; one coming from the heinous victimization of slavery and a resulting “amazing spiritual insight” (Thurman 1975, 36) and the other coming from his profound philosophical discoveries and fight for his soul; both desired fundamental and foundational transformation of the ground in Western culture. Both perceived that the foundations of the culture were so flawed that attempts to mend it were inadequate. Thurman stressed relationship, saying, “We are made for each other” (Thurman 1965, 112). Poteat declared, “This whole thing must be rethought” (Poteat 1990, 3). Thurman was coming from the life experiences of slavery and Poteat from the inward struggles of the mind to throw off the shackles of the sin of the “world gone mad on Descartes” (phrase recollected from a personal conversation with Poteat). Both in their own ways were about the dismantling of a profaned culture and the redemption of “the religion profaned” by that culture (Thurman 1965, 112).

Thurman posits a new reason for being that has relationship at its foundation. Poteat describes how a world gone mad on Descartes has so disembodied us as to make relationship impossible: “Cartesianism, tacit and explicit, invites us to embrace a view of ourselves in the universe which seduces us with the promise of Godlike power, and thereby separates us from our true ground and humanity?” (recollected from a conversation with Poteat, but a close paraphrase is in Poteat 1988, 3).

Without our humanity intact, there is no relationship. Armed with the highest form of abstraction, mathematical reasoning, as the “superordinate authority of the whole philosophical tradition” (recollected from a conversation with Poteat, but a close paraphrase is in Poteat 1990, 1), our medium of ultimate access to the physical universe, we can then rationalize anything and make anything good that serves, subordinates itself, and sacrifices itself for this authority. Such a stance makes slavery an acceptable possibility. Relationships and human discourse become alliances of power where we deal with each other as objects to be manipulated rather than people stamped with the image of God. The culture enables us to talk about others and not to others. Certainly, we don’t see ourselves as made for each other.

Armed with this view of life, the solution to evil becomes some kind of program to be designed by the “children of light” (Poteat 1988, 4). There is a story about Thomas Jefferson that didn’t make the history books, nor was it ever mentioned by Thomas Jefferson. Looked upon as the enlightened American philosopher par excellence, Thomas Jefferson not only owned slaves, but overlooked the evil madness of his immediate family. Two of his sister’s sons “took a slave into the meat house, put his body on the block and dismembered it because he had accidentally broken a piece of crockery much beloved of their mother” (Poteat 1988, 4). When evil is extracted from the world of spirit, it becomes a problem to be solved by the mind; then evil has its most eternal grip on our lives—eternal, because we are spirit refusing to be spirit and thereby lose our ability to recognize evil.

The Western white way of knowing must be redone. The sense of superiority and domination now manifest in the arrogant sense of achievement felt by Western and American high-tech culture must be exchanged for Thurman’s claim, “We are made for each other” (Thurman 1965, 112). Rather than having our destiny defined by a desire to be number one, it is better for us to focus on loving our neighbor, which after all, is the great commandment and the basis for all relationships.

In a world dominated by a culture in which rational knowledge is God and achievement the temple of worship, the opportunity is offered for all to see that Western culture is superior. Freedom is defined as joining this culture, recognizing its superiority, and bowing before it. The invitation is offered to all who would like to participate. The flip side is that if you don’t, you will be destroyed.

However, when we look at the product of this self-ordained culture of achievement, the future looks dangerous. The very technology and knowledge deemed so supremely valuable threaten the whole planet. The destruction of the rain forests, the pollution of the air, water table, rivers, and oceans; the damage to the ozone layer and the disembodied language of technology and social media are only a few examples of the destructive force of this world “gone mad on Descartes.” Add to this the daily destruction of the pinnacle of creation, people. Racism destroys millions and sexism millions more, and workers “bring home more than their pay checks to their loved ones and families.”¹ Today, we have the ultimate madness; we can destroy ourselves many times over with our atomic weapons of war. Even by their own standards of management, the Western world has been a failure. But when one is mad, standards do not matter, only the preservation of the psychotic view of the world is important.

The European western mind set has created an imaginary picture of the world to which its proponents remain a prisoner. This picture can be changed with the advent of another view, or picture. Such an advent represents a kind of incarnational presence that lives in the midst of the old world without becoming a part of its sickness or evil. Dr. Poteat talked about this phenomenon in the commencement address, “Anxiety,

Courage and Truth,” which he delivered to the Duke Divinity School class of 1961. He said, “This is what is meant by idolatry—the imprisonment of ourselves in any given picture of the world. It is God who invades this world, threatening us ultimately, but also setting us free” (Poteat 1990, 283).

When this is expanded to the analysis of a whole culture, the immensity of the problem emerges. We have not only a person in need of psychiatric care, we have a whole world in need of revolutionary change. Like the psychotic when the winds of change begin to blow, the culture feels threatened on every hand, and any challenge to its way of knowing is met with resistance and aggression. In a world fully armed to protect itself on every front, salvation becomes a dangerous endeavor. This is a dangerous world! It is a psychotic world that does not want to be healed, and, in short, a world “gone mad on Descartes.”

Freedom from this dilemma must come from a quarter outside the domain of white Western culture. The present has gone awry. Both conservative and progressive white Western political models are incapable of getting us out of this madness because both are trapped in the “madness.” The conservative solution is unabashedly tied to Western culture and is so threatened that any attempt at change is met with psychotic force and violence. The liberal progressive solution may be even more dangerous because it hides behind a sense of equality and freedom but does not recognize its own identity with the psychosis while maintaining a stance of patronizing disdain and awestruck idolatry.

I believe that one of the major avenues of redemption God offers white people and Western culture is the possibility of relationships with Black people. Just as the relationship with Jesus the Christ calls us to a new being so does this relationship call white people from the captivity of their old self of domination and control to a new being that shares in a relationship of equality and freedom. This is a new relationship that calls for new “wine skins” (Matthew 9:17). The old wineskins will not work.

Into this world God has sent the Black struggle for freedom and, with this struggle, that “vastly creative spiritual insight” (Thurman 1975, 36). When white people accept this presence and enter into the struggle, they will find relationship and life and find it more abundantly. However, once again the case seems to be that situation described in the Gospel of John, “The Word has become flesh and dwells among us, but the world receives it not” (John 1:14, NRSV).

ENDNOTE

¹See the lyrics to Ysaye M. Bamwell's "More than a Paycheck:"

We bring more than a paycheck to our loved ones and family.

We bring more than a paycheck to our loved ones and family.

We bring

asbestosis,

silicosis,

brown lung,

black lung disease.

And radiation hits the children before they've even been conceived.

I wanted more pay.

But what I've got today

is more than I bargained for

when I walked through that door...

Workers lend an ear.

It's important that you know.

With every job there is a fear

that disease will take its toll.

If not disease, then injury may befall your lot.

If not injury, then stress is going to tie you up in knots.

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