



# Remembering Charles McCoy

## Phil Mullins

ABSTRACT Key Words: Charles S. McCoy and Michael Polanyi

*This essay is an obituary notice for Charles S. McCoy, who introduced many to Polanyi's ideas and made creative use of Polanyi's in his scholarship.*

Charles S. McCoy, emeritus professor at Pacific School of Religion and Graduate Theological Union, died unexpectedly at his Berkeley, California home on November 3, 2002. Although he was 79 years old, Charles' interests, projects and commitments had declined little in the years after his retirement. Just a few weeks before his death, he discussed with me whether or not he would come to what he regarded as cold Toronto for this year's Polanyi Society annual meeting, as he had frequently done over the last 25 years. He simply hated to miss the discussion of any papers related to Michael Polanyi that looked promising.

McCoy was born in Laurinburg, North Carolina on June 27, 1923; he received undergraduate degrees from Presbyterian Junior College and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He earned a B.D. at Duke University and was ordained a United Methodist minister in 1945. For several years, he was a Navy chaplain and served as a pastor in North Carolina, Connecticut and Florida. In the early fifties, McCoy went to Yale for Ph. D. work; H. Richard Niebuhr and Robert Calhoun were his chief mentors. He graduated in 1956 with a dissertation on a topic in federal theology, "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius."

After teaching several years at the University of Florida, McCoy came to Berkeley's Pacific School of Religion in 1959 to establish a program in religion and higher education. McCoy remained in Berkeley until his retirement in 1992; his projects as an educator were numerous and innovative and I can briefly note here only a few. In the early sixties, he helped to found the Graduate Theological Union, one of the first ecumenical educational experiments, one that linked several seminaries in the San Francisco Bay area with the University of California, Berkeley. In the early seventies, he was a founder and director of the GTU's Center for Ethics and Social Policy, a center that worked on policy ethics issues with business organizations. Later, this venture led to helping establish similar centers in places like New York and to work on corporate ethics with groups like the Conference Board.

Although he was an academic, Charles McCoy was always also an activist, one guided by a social vision that called both for affirming and transforming institutions. In fact, he quibbled with one of his mentors H. Richard Niebuhr, about his readiness to be a change agent. From his early days at Chapel Hill and his time in Florida through his first years in Berkeley, McCoy was immersed in the civil rights movement. In the late sixties, he was deeply involved in Democratic politics. In the late sixties and early seventies, as campuses were revolting, McCoy was the faculty sponsor for a set of disgruntled students at Pacific School of Religion (sometimes then dubbed "Specific Tool of Religion") who set up an urban educational experiment in San Francisco. In the seventies, McCoy annoyed some students and faculty on the left by organizing, through the Center for Ethics and Social Policy, an ethics consulting program working with senior management at Wells Fargo Bank and Levi Strauss. In more recent years, McCoy worked with Korean United Methodists on a special education project in which he served as the president of a new institution.

In his forty plus years in the academy, McCoy produced a significant and strikingly diverse body of scholarship. I cannot here do more than allude to some of his interests and publications. Early in his career there were books and articles treating religion and higher education. Perhaps the most important was *The Responsible Campus* (1972). McCoy was steadfastly an opponent of talk of Christian uniqueness insofar as that prevented appreciation of the rich pluralism of belief and openness to the many possibilities for God's action in an ongoing, changing creation. Matters concerned with religion in the university and the church-related college were matters of applied theology for McCoy. That is, questions about religion and education were, for McCoy, inseparably connected to questions about theology and theological method. From the sixties until 1980, McCoy wrote and rewrote his book on theology, which was finally published in 1980 as *When gods Change: Hope for Theology*. It is an odd book that perhaps suffered from too many rewrites. But it is also an insightful book whose constructive contributions to theology never got their due. The federalist theology that McCoy studied as a graduate student provided the overarching framework for his own work as an ethicist and theologian. *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (1991), written with J. Wayne Baker (which included a translation of a 1534 Bullinger treatise), was a significant publication that shows McCoy as a careful historian. *Management of Values: The Ethical Difference in Corporate Policy and Performance* is a 1985 book that reflects over a decade's work (in the projects of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy) with large organizations. Stimulated by his late wife Marjorie Casebier McCoy, literature and the arts also figured in McCoy's array of scholarly publications and projects.

What I have omitted from this cursory survey of interests and scholarship is Charles' ongoing interest in the ideas of Michael Polanyi. I, like many others over the last forty years met McCoy as a teacher; one of his regular cycle of PSR/GTU classes focussed on Polanyi's thought and every class, whatever the topic, included some link to Polanyi. Just last spring in his tenth year after retirement, McCoy taught a GTU seminar with Doug Adams advertised as "Polanyi: Arts/Ethics/Theology." Like William Poteat at Duke, McCoy was throughout his life an indefatigable Polanyi evangelist from whom generations of students picked up an interest in post-critical thought. McCoy was a provocative and sometimes gifted teacher. He was good at shifting responsibility for education to students who were assigned to do such things in class as "summarize the main points and raise some questions about Chapter 4 of *PK*." He was patient with paltry student achievements and willingly supplemented the efforts of those who confessed perplexity. In his pedagogy, he put to good use his sense of humor and other convivial elements. But he also could systematically set forth pointed criticisms and often did so in discussing much modern philosophy and theology. In any class, he made many, often unconventional, linkages: Agatha Christie's approach to solving crimes was a tool to explain Plato and Plato was vehicle to explain covenants and covenants became a central notion to illumine Polanyi's tacit dimension.

McCoy discovered Polanyi early. He first read *SFS* in 1957 at the suggestion of a colleague at the University of Florida who recommended that he read Karl Polanyi and then, as an afterthought, suggested he might also be interested in Michael Polanyi.<sup>1</sup> McCoy then read *PK* after it came out in 1958. He quickly saw the affinity between Polanyi's ideas and the interests he had developed in the Bible, federal theology and the theology and *cathekontic* ethics of his mentor H. R. Niebuhr. In fact, McCoy was excited enough after reading *PK* that he wrote Niebuhr about the book and found that Niebuhr already had discovered *PK* and found Polanyi's ideas an interesting complement to his own.<sup>2</sup> After McCoy came to Berkeley in 1959, he had a number of opportunities to meet and talk directly with Polanyi. Polanyi gave the McEnerney Lectures at UC, Berkeley in February of 1962. Polanyi spent 1962-63 at the Center for Advance Study in Palo Alto and McCoy visited him several times there.<sup>3</sup> Polanyi visited McCoy's graduate seminar on Christianity and Contemporary Intellectual

Movements, a class in which Richard Gelwick was a student<sup>4</sup> McCoy became the first reader for Richard Gelwick's dissertation on Polanyi (the first on Polanyi's non scientific thought) and Gelwick worked with Polanyi in Palo Alto as well as with McCoy. McCoy and Gelwick arranged the February 1963 meeting and discussion between Polanyi and Paul Tillich. Polanyi came to Pacific School of Religion in April 1963 to give an address titled "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground."<sup>5</sup> McCoy may also have met with Polanyi in later visits to the Bay Area such as his January 1968 visit for three lectures at UC, Berkeley;<sup>6</sup> he also visited Polanyi in Oxford on more than one occasion.

After discovering Polanyi's philosophy and being on the scene as Polanyi refined his ideas in the sixties, McCoy more and more adopted a Polanyian idiom to articulate his own theological and ethical vision. Polanyi's thought became the epistemological glove that perfectly fitted McCoy's federalist and Niebuhrian theological hand. Despite the diversity of his intellectual interests, there is coherence to McCoy's thought and Polanyi's work in some ways helped provide that coherence. In the special issue of *TAD* focusing on McCoy's thought, published in the summer of 1998, McCoy identified himself as a post-critical Christian federalist.<sup>7</sup> The issue explored the meaning of this appellation, showing the creative ways in which McCoy appropriated Polanyi and combined Polanyian ideas with other themes. I shall not try to chart that exploration again here. But I do (somewhat immodestly) recommend, as insightful, the reflections of the authors of the four essays in this issue, Gelwick, Adams, Mullins and Rolnick, who represented about 25 years worth of Polanyi-oriented McCoy graduate students.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, for anyone who wants to see McCoy's Polanyian applications in living color, I recommend the several essays he contributed to *TAD*, especially his address from the 1991 Polanyi conference at Kent State<sup>9</sup> and his essay included in the special issue on ethics published just two weeks before he died.<sup>10</sup>

With one of his favorite teachers Johannes Althusius, McCoy saw persons as symbiotes, social companions immersed in and constituted by our conversations with predecessors and contemporaries, and directed toward successors. Certainly Charles McCoy's voice will be missed in the gatherings of the Polanyi Society, but of course his influence will continue to be a part of the conversation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See McCoy's discussion in his essay "The Postcritical and Fiduciary Dimensions in Polanyi and Tillich," *TAD* 22:1(1995-96): 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Mullins, "Historical and Textual Notes on H. Richard Niebuhr and Michael Polanyi," *TAD* 24:1 (1997-98): 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> *TAD* 22:1 (1995-96): 6.

<sup>4</sup> This detail is noted in the 1999 draft of William Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher*, p. 392. On several occasions, I heard a story from McCoy about at least one other Polanyi visit to a McCoy class on Polanyi, a visit in which McCoy was somewhat embarrassed by one of his beginning students who presumptuously instructed Polanyi on several points; what delighted McCoy was that Polanyi took notes.

<sup>5</sup> See also Richard Gelwick's account in "The Polanyi-Tillich Dialogue of 1963: Polanyi's Search For a Post-Critical Logic In Science and In Theology," *TAD* 22:1 (1995-96): 11-13. Polanyi's 1963 PSR address was published in *Philosophy Today*, VII (Spring, 1963), pp. 4-14.

<sup>6</sup> Scott and Moleski, 426.

<sup>7</sup> Charles S. McCoy, "A Response to the Essays On My Thought" *TAD* 24:3 (1997-98): 45.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Gelwick, "Faith as a First Principle in Charles McCoy's Theology and Ethics," 29-40; Doug Adams, Charles S. McCoy, "Orphic Sleuth of the Seminary As School of the Dance," 41-43; Phil Mullins, "Permutations of Post-Critical Thinking: Themes in Charles McCoy's Life and Thought," 5-14; Philip A. Rolnick, "The Innovating Covenant—

Exploring The Work of Charles S. McCoy,” 15-28.

<sup>9</sup> Charles S. McCoy, “The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives for Ethics,” *TAD* 18:2 (1991-1992): 33-39.

<sup>10</sup> Charles S. McCoy, “Ethics For the Post-Critical Era: Perspectives from the Thought of Michael Polanyi.” *TAD* 29:1 (2002-2003): 6-21.

## Notes on Contributors

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