# Bill Poteat's Post-Critical Logic and the Origins of Modernity

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Polanyi, Poteat, logic, visual experience, oral/aural experience, Greek thought, Hebraic thought.
*In* Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, Poteat draws upon Polanyi to explicate what he calls an "oral/aural logic," which he thinks informs Polanyi's thought and which is different from the conventional "visual logic" of the Western philosophical tradition, and then argues that this oral/aural logic is implied in the Hebraic understanding of reality. This idea is a key to understanding the genesis of the modern worldview, which can be conceptualized as involving certain elements of the Hebraic worldview distorted by an excessively visual orientation.*

My first encounter with Bill Poteat (or "Poteat," as he liked his students to call him) was in the Fall of 1985, when I began my graduate studies in political theory at Duke University. As an undergraduate at Texas Tech I had studied under Clarke Cochran, a political theorist from Duke who introduced me to Michael Polanyi's work and who enthusiastically encouraged me to take Poteat' s class on *Personal Knowledge*. Upon arriving at Duke I looked at the course schedule and saw that Poteat was indeed teaching a graduate seminar, so I immediately signed up. The class had a hopelessly vague title (something like "Special Problems in Religion") so I had no idea whether we would be reading Polanyi or not. As it happened, we spent the semester reading the page proofs for *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, which was actually published late in the semester and which has turned out to be perhaps the single most important book influencing my own intellectual development.

When I arrived at Duke the burning question in my own mind was one that has become *the* central question for postwar political theory (and certainly one of the central questions for most contemporary humanistic disciplines), namely, the genesis of the modern age. How did the modern worldview, with its ultimately nihilistic logic, develop? We certainly cannot escape from modernity until we understand where it came from. *Polanyian Meditations* seemed to answer this question—or at least, some of its secondary arguments combined with ideas developed by Poteat in our wide-ranging class discussions apparently provided a framework for doing so. This essay will explicate a critical aspect of Poteat's work, and its relation to Polanyi, that is primarily only implicit in *Polanyian Meditations* itself.

Stated most crudely, Poteat's argument is that modernity is the outcome of the incoherent medieval synthesis of Greek and Hebraic thought. It should immediately be stressed that he is *not* making the argument, usually associated with Adolph Harnack and other liberal Protestant theologians, that a pristine, purely ethical primitive Christianity was corrupted by Greek metaphysical concepts. Rather, Poteat's argument is that there is a "Greek metaphysics" and a "Hebraic metaphysics" and, as he so often said in class, "the Greeks got it wrong and the Hebrews got it right." What, then, is the difference between Greek metaphysics and Hebraic metaphysics?

As a first approximation, Poteat can be understood to say that the Greek, or at least 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 sound. This has many critical phenomenological implications, as visual experience is quite different from oral/aural experience, and indeed much of *Polanyian Meditations* is concerned with examining these differences. 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 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. 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.

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. 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.

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 static 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 literate environment caused 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 is perhaps most obviously illustrated by the first chapter of Genesis. 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 things, and from this it follows that the Hebraic universe, unlike the Greek universe, has infinite possibilities, or stated differently, is much more radically contingent.

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, the analysis of *Polanyian Meditations* focuses primarily on the effects of a hypertrophied visual orientation, and certainly Poteat argues

that (thanks to the printing press) visual experience has 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 Poteat 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. And, in terms of the issue raised above, the influence of the Hebraic model of reality on modern consciousness, Poteat argues that modern Western notions of personhood are very much derived (although in a distorted way) from this model. In any case, Poteat is ultimately saying that the basic model of reality of the pre-philosophical pagan cultures was the rhythms of the natural world, as conceived by an oral culture; the basic model of reality for the Greek philosophers was the same nature, as conceived by a literate culture; and the basic model of reality for the Hebrews was the speech act, as conceived by an oral culture. The decisive difference between Greek and Hebraic metaphysics lies in their primordial models of reality.

Poteat's (implicit) 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 use of 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, Poteat 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. (This is a rather complicated argument that space does not allow me even to summarize here; see *Polanyian Meditations*, chapters IV-VII.) 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 Poteat, or rather for the oral-aural logic Poteat attempts to explicate, limits can still exist even in a situation of infinite possibilities.

It should be noted here that Poteat 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. 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 medieval culture becomes more aware of the contingency implied by the biblical understanding of God's action but is unable to conceptualize any necessary limits on that contingency because the (visual) concept of necessity inherited from the Greeks cannot coexist 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 the necessity of God's faithfulness, eventually leaving only the absolute contingency of a world created by 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 residual (or rather, never really fully comprehended) elements of the Hebraic oral/aural logic became completely inaccessible to the Western mind.

It should be stressed that Poteat is not fingering literacy as the "culprit" in this scenario, much less advocating anything so absurd as returning to a non-literate state as a solution. His analysis would seem to imply that the development of universal literacy would not have led to nihilism if the oral/aural logic implicit in the Bible had been properly explicated during the Middle Ages. And indeed, returning to the issue discussed above, where I mentioned that ultimately Poteat sees the difference between the Greeks and the Hebrews as one of taking the cycles of nature as opposed to the speech act as the basic model of reality, three important observations could be made: First, a literate culture more thoroughly informed by the Hebraic model could explicate that model's oral/aural logic in a way that a less analytic oral culture could not; modernity became nihilistic not exclusively because it was more visual but because that increased visuality exacerbated the tendencies already present (as in, for example, late medieval nominalism) toward a picture of the world as purely contingent. Second, the Greek philosophers were perhaps able to explicate only a limited visual logic because their pagan background did not provide them with the model of the speech act as a possible model of analysis; they were able to exploit the analytic possibilities opened up by literacy only in a very limited, and ultimately unbalanced, way. Third, and similarly, the tendency of medieval Christian philosophy and theology to use only the Greek logical model could have resulted from the residual paganism in medieval culture; the incomplete penetration of the Hebraic model of reality into the medieval mind could have prevented a full recognition that Greek logical concepts were not appropriate tools for analysis beyond a limited range of issues.

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 sketched out roughly in *Polanyian Meditations* and its application to philosophical, theological, ethical, and political issues–with, of course, his all-important caveat that this is most emphatically not a merely "intellectual" exercise but rather a project that requires a thoroughgoing reorientation of our entire mindbodily being.

Finally, what does all of this have to do with Polanyi? The reader may have already guessed. The central argument of *Polanyian Meditations* is that Polanyi begins to explicate such an oral/aural logic in the context of epistemology and philosophy of science–but that he doesn't realize that he is doing this and that his attempt is not entirely successful because he is still saddled with the inadequate vocabulary of traditional (visual, or rather literate pagan) Western philosophy. More specifically, Poteat observes that Polanyi's formulations tend to conflate logical categories (which we normally understand as atemporal) and causal categories (which we typically take to be temporal). What Polanyi is attempting to do with this awkward vocabulary, says Poteat, is to convey a sense of the world being ordered temporally, as it would be understood from an oral/aural paradigm, rather than being ordered atemporally, as it would be seen from a visual standpoint. In fact, it was Poteat's puzzlement over this awkward vocabulary that began the process of uncovering the "deeper wit," as he calls it,

informing Polanyi's critique of modernity. And in uncovering this "deeper wit" Poteat has made explicit what Polanyi is doing tacitly, placed it in a larger historical context, and thus begun to recapture and explicate the oral/aural logic of Hebraic metaphysics that can be our only escape from nihilism.

# Notes on Contributors

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