The following paper is given for advance reading by Sam Mann to indicate the sort of talk he will be presenting at the Poteat Legacy Conference. It dates from the early 1990s.

**The Reflections of A White Ghetto Preacher**

**On the Life and Teachings of Dr.William H. Poteat**

by Sam Mann

Are white people, progressive or conservative, unwilling to give up what it takes in order for real relationship to take place between Black people and white people? In short, did white people leave the civil rights movement because they could not follow Black leadership?

Vincent Harding`s book addresses this question in 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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 like to be the savior because the savior is powerful and knows all, and in a society that worships rationality as the God of knowledge, they remain in charge because everybody knows that Black folks aren't educated and don't know anything. 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.[[2]](#footnote-2)

At Duke I met my first real mentor, Dr. William H. Poteat. He still remains as close to me as a thought, and we usually 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 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 as a person and he wanted to know how you knew. Relationship was in his heart, and you were in his heart.

I remember the final chapter meditation that he gave to the 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.[[3]](#footnote-3)

He was giving voice to this 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 some piety. He offered me himself and a willingness to relate. He knew about Calvary and “Eloi, eloi, lamach sachbachtani?” 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 did not meet Thurman in theology school, a word must be said about him now because his writing are so interrelated to the questions that Poteat raised for me. 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 racism and the resulting “amazing spiritual insight,” and the other coming from his profound philosophical discoveries and fight for his soul, were both desiring fundamental and foundational changes of the ground of the culture. Both perceived that the cultural foundations were so flawed that even its attempts to mend itself were inadequate. Thurman stressing relationship, saying, “We are made for each other”[[4]](#footnote-4) and Poteat saying, “This whole thing must be rethought.”[[5]](#footnote-5) 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 a “world gone mad on Descartes.” Both in their own ways were about the dismantling of a profaned culture and the redemption of the religion profaned by that culture.

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?[[6]](#footnote-6)

Without our humanity intact, there can be no relationship. Armed with the highest form of abstraction, mathematical reasoning, as our "superordinate authority of the whole philosophical tradition,"[[7]](#footnote-7) our medium of ultimate access to the physical universe, we can then rationalize anything and make anything good that serves, subordinates itself, sacrifices itself for, this authority. Such a stance makes slavery an acceptable possibility. Relationships become alliances of power where we deal with each other as objects to be dominated rather than people stamped with the image of God. We are able 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." There is a story about Thomas Jefferson that didn't make the history books. Looked upon as the enlightened American philosopher par excellence, Thomas Jefferson not only owned slaves, but overlooked the evil madness of two of his nephews who "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."[[8]](#footnote-8)  When evil is extracted from the world of the spirit that is, it is 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."[[9]](#footnote-9) Rather than having our destiny caught up in some desire for being number one, it would be better for us all 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 does not look good. The very technology and knowledge deemed so supremely valuable threaten the whole planet. The destruction of the rain forests; the pollution of the air, watertable, rivers, and ocean; the damage to the ozone layer 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."[[10]](#footnote-10) Today, we have the ultimate madness, we can destroy ourselves many times over With our 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 neurotic 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 and 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.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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 neurotic when the winds of change begin to blow, the culture feels threatened on every hand, and any challenge to its way of knowing is net 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 neurotic 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 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 the western culture and is so threatened that any attempt at change is met with neurotic 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 neurosis.

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." 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."[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.

1. Harding, There Is a River, 127 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lincoln Barnett, The Universe and Dr. Einstein (Mattituck, NY: American Reprint Co., 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. W. H. Poteat, Duke Divinity School Quarterly Review, Fall, 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Poteat, A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations, iii. This is another unpublished manuscript that was sent to me by Dr. Poteat. The book has since been published by the University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Poteat, "The Banality of Evil: The Darkness at the Center" The Loy H. Witherspoon Lectures in Religious Studies, University of North Carolina Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina, November 13, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ysaye M. Barnewell, "More than a paycheck," Breaths, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Flying Fish Records, 1988:

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| 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 radiation hits the children before they really been conceivedI wanted more pay, but all I got today more than I bargained for when I walked through that doorWorkers lend an ear, it’s important that you know that diseasewill take its toll If not disease the injury, may befall your lotIf not injury then stress is going to tie you up in knots |

 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Poteat, "Anxiety, Courage, and Truth," The Duke Divinity School Review, Fall, 1965. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thurman, Deep River, and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)