

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF WILLIAM H. POTEAT'S PHILOSOPHY

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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.

Political Theory and the Modern Age

Since the Second World War, political theory has become 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 also the story of Western racism and imperialism. Second, at least some of the modern revolutionary movements dedicated to creating freedom instead developed 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 impending demographic suicide of postwar consumer culture.

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.

The most important attempt to understand the essence of the modern era immediately after the First World War made it clear a crisis existed was that of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger argues that early modern philosophy made a fatal mistake in attempting to ground knowledge in the human subject, that is in attempting to describe the structures of the mind that allow humans to receive a clear, objective “picture” of external reality, as this project leads inevitably to the conclusion that external reality is actually a creation of the mind. 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, and ultimately recommends a rearticulation of the prephilosophical 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 ultimately his work has provided, at least implicitly, the starting point for most subsequent attempts to understand the essence of the modern age.¹

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 Jurgen 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—that is, the capacity for intersubjective communication that has allowed science, parliamentary democracy, and other positive features of modernity to develop and flourish—and the instrumental rationalism identified

by Horkheimer and Adorno, which he refers to as subject-centered reason--that is, the Enlightenment's misinterpretation of the Scientific Revolution as embodied in Cartesian and Kantian rationalism (both of which inevitably degenerate into Nietzschean nihilism) and which is 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.²

Several later theories broadened the scope of enquiry 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, 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 metaphysic of the Enlightenment.³

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 Lowith (another student of Heidegger's) and Eric Voegelin have

posited that the political movements of the modern age could be best understood as immanentized versions of Christian eschatological expectations.⁴ I will discuss Voegelin in somewhat more detail here because his formulations will turn out to be particularly important when I turn to Poterat. Voegelin's characterization of modernity is that it is a (partial) revival of the ancient phenomenon of gnosticism. As a first approximation, gnosticism is frequently understood as an early Christian heresy. Whereas for orthodox Christianity, God is good and created a good world, but humans corrupted that world by sinning, thus necessitating God's redemptive action, for gnosticism, at least in its most simplistic rendition, there are two gods, an evil one (sometimes identified with the creator-God of the Old Testament) who created the material world, which is therefore evil, and a good one (identified, at least in Christian versions of gnosticism, with Christ), with whom one can achieve mystical union, thus escaping the evil world of materiality into pure spirituality, through esoteric knowledge or *gnosis*. For Voegelin, the various modern secular ideologies are essentially updated versions of gnosticism—that is, they are attempts to escape human finitude and achieve a realm of perfection through esoteric knowledge. Whereas the relevant knowledge in the ancient world was mystical in nature, the modern versions hope for progress toward perfection through immanent knowledge, as in scientism, revolutionary Marxism, etc.

Voegelin argues that modern gnostic movements have their origins in the later Middle Ages, when European civilization was strongly growing but the dominant Augustinian conception of history, which saw meaning only in the sacred history of God's revelations and nothing but the meaningless rise and fall of empires in the secular realm, could not give any meaning to the civilizational progress of that period; the gnostic attempt to achieve (this-worldly) perfection ultimately supplied that meaning. Voegelin argues that Augustine's relegation of secular history to

meaninglessness results from the Christian doctrine that Christ represents the final and complete revelation of God, so that life on this earth, after Christ, becomes nothing more than waiting for the end of the world. This view of civilizational futility made sense as the Roman Empire collapsed into the Dark Ages but became unbearable as European civilization rebuilt itself after about the year 1000. Voegelin appears to conclude that what is needed to give civilizational existence meaning, but not ultimate meaning, as gnosticism does, is a kind of process theology that sees God's revelation as continuing throughout history, with civilizational meaning deriving from preparation for further revelations.⁵

It should be noted, again because it will be important for my discussion of Poteat, that Voegelin is probably somewhat sloppy in his use of the term gnosticism. The ancient gnostics regarded matter as evil and wanted to escape from it; the modern movements Voegelin labels as gnostic are generally thoroughly materialistic and indeed usually regard ideas about the spiritual realm as delusory. It seems very peculiar to describe as gnostic individuals and movements dedicated (often fanatically) to political action in the material world. The better term to describe the political movements Voegelin is concerned with would likely be *millenarian*. Stated most simply, millenarian movements regard the world, or at least the social world, to be in a state of corruption, but anticipate a divine intervention which will perfect the world, or at least correct the corrupted social order. The parallel with various modern political movements is quite obvious, and indeed Voegelin himself sometimes uses the term millenarianism interchangeably with gnosticism. The difference is also obvious: true millenarian movements expect social disorder to be corrected by divine intervention whereas the various modern revolutionary movements attempt to perfect or at least correct society through human action, and this difference parallels the difference that Voegelin

sees between ancient and modern gnosticism.⁶

As it happens, the term gnosticism is probably still helpful, because a distinction should be made between political movements of rising expectations, such as the Puritan, French, and Russian revolutions, which, as just noted, would be best described by the term millenarian, and later movements or psychic orientations based on disillusionment, such as fascism and what has been called expressive individualism, that is the (ultimately Nietzschean) culture of aesthetic self-expression which has come to dominate and even define Western culture since the 1960s.⁷ One might say that the disappointment of millenarian expectations tends to lead to gnostic alienation from the world, and in fact I will use this formulation later in this essay.

Finally, another position, taken recently by Charles Taylor, Michael Gillespie, and others, finds the origins of modernity in late medieval nominalism. Essentially, these theorists argue 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 into humans (who are made in God's image), resulting in the subjectivism and perfectionism of modernity. Gillespie also points out that the Enlightenment tended to transfer the nominalist God's irresistible will 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.⁸

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*, 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 argument could even be described as a kind of neopagan version of Barth, applied to ancient and modern philosophy, although there does not appear to be any evidence of a direct influence.⁹

About a generation after Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr developed an interpretation of the modern age that was somewhat similar to that 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 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 human agency as corrupted by sin. The medieval synthesis of these two views eventually resulted in 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. The Renaissance view ultimately triumphed over Protestantism to inform the modern age because the Reformation was unable to completely articulate the implications of its expurgation of Greek influences from Christianity, and Niebuhr sees this project as the critical task of a revived Protestant theology.¹⁰

The Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac can be read as developing a partial insight achieved by Niebuhr and thereby clarifying the nature of modernity in the Catholic world. An obvious criticism of Niebuhr's argument is that it does have a certain conceptual plausibility but 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, which 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 neoscholastic (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 neoscholastic interpretation implies, and thus also with no possibility of a pure nature uncorrupted by sin (and therefore capable of 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 Protestant culture. As I will discuss below, however, it could explain modern tendencies in the Catholic world.¹¹

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.¹² As with Voegelin, I will discuss Gunton in somewhat more detail. In Gunton's 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. (It is interesting to note that for Gunton postmodernism is actually Platonic; it sees reality as pluralistic and therefore conflictual, but simply chooses to tolerate, or perhaps even celebrate, conflict rather attempting to eradicate it—while remaining in denial about the ultimately Nietzschean implications of such a move.) 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 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, non-instrumental type of technology that would be environmentally sustainable but still allow a reasonable level of material prosperity for all.

Gunton’s analysis can also shed important light on process theology, which has been a highly influential attempt to address apparently incoherent elements in classical Christian theology (and,

as noted, has apparently been embraced by Voegelin, among other political theorists). Process theology could be understood as a confused attempt to articulate something like a conception of the Holy Spirit, or more specifically, to overcome the static spiritual situation implied by historical Christian theology by developing a more dynamic conception of God's action—but with an essentially unitary understanding of God, which fails to distinguish between the actions of the Father and those of the Spirit. Thus from Gunton's standpoint, even modern theology that attempts to escape what it sees as the limitations of premodern theology ultimately is entangled in the same misunderstandings.

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 Christianity, since all of the apparent features of modernity taken as essential by various theorists—subjectivism, mechanism, progressivism—can be traced to issues in Christianity. There is a fairly clear line of thought from the Reformation and neoscholasticism to the materialistic rationalism of the Enlightenment and thence to the aesthetic or neopagan irrationalism of late modernity. Indeed, it is probably correct to say that modern civilization is a Christian civilization: all of the early figures of the Enlightenment saw themselves as Christians, and full-blown secularism is a relatively late development. 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 political theorists (and theologians) 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 more recent theorists. Habermas, as noted above, would be the obvious example, but Gillespie, Taylor, Gunton, and others have also indicated that the modern worldview appears to have been partly correct. 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.¹³

The recognition that modernity is ambiguous has an important implication for the concept of progress, namely that, whether or not it is the essential feature of modernity, it is perhaps not as entirely mistaken as some of the earlier postwar theorists assumed. One might make a valid distinction between moderate, tentative social progress and extreme, essentially millenarian expectations of perfection, and I shall return to this issue as I begin my initial synthesis below.

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.

John Calvin is the key link for the English speaking world. 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 concept of predestination. Hobbes, in effect, merely replaces God's will with the absolute mathematical determination of mechanical forces, leading to the modern English-speaking picture of reality 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 hold of the subject on German thought is perhaps

most strikingly revealed in Habermas, who is able to grasp that the essence of modernity is more complicated than just the dominance of the subject, but still conceptualizes his more nuanced view in terms of subjectivity.

The situation in the Catholic world, which in general has been less thoroughly modern than Protestant culture, 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 noted earlier, God's creation as a single event rather than 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 neoscholastic 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. 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.

We can now consider the issue of progress and the millenarianism 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 wildly 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. Finally, the movements of disillusionment that I argued would be more properly labeled as gnostic could be seen as reactions to the failure of those millenarian movements. This analysis accounts well for the general trajectory of modernity: From the Reformation through the eighteenth century, economic growth, political reform, and gradual secularization in the Protestant countries and (more modest) economic growth but political stagnation in the Catholic world; from the French Revolution through the First World War accelerating (although ultimately ambiguous) control over nature encouraging increasingly more radical millenarian expectations, culminating in communism; and, after the First World War shattered progressive ideologies, a proliferation of essentially gnostic movements attempting to escape an irredeemable world.

In order to complete this synthesis, however, it is necessary to examine Poteat's understanding of modernity.

Poteat on Modernity

Poteat's sees modernity, most broadly, as the 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.¹⁴ 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 sound. 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 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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 relatively 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, 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 maintains its order with his ever-faithful will.

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 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 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 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.¹⁷ 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 largely 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 visibility 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.

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; it fails to the extent that the Greek model is misapplied to understand such phenomena. 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.

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. Very generally speaking, we can say that the description of modernity implied by Poteat’s analysis is one of the implications of the Hebraic model of reality emerging in a confused way, distorted by the residual elements of paganism (particular of Greek philosophical paganism) in medieval consciousness.

More specifically, Poteat’s conception 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 an paradigmatic speaker that is also ordered, that is, subject to necessity, by that speaker’s faithfulness, is the conceptual basis for modern inductive, 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 those worldly appearances can be trusted to a much greater extent than Plato or even Aristotle could have imagined, and can be used to induce general principles which could be thought of as articulations of specific elements of necessity in the Hebraic oral/aural logic.¹⁸ Similarly, since each human being is a unique, contingent creature of God, created by the unconditional love that is a manifestation of oral/aural necessity, modern notions of freedom and equality can gradually break down the bloodline-based hierarchies (that is the hierarchies based on natural fertility) of the ancient world.¹⁹

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 necessity of God's faithfulness but rather only the necessity of a kind of truncated 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 dimension 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 of the necessity derived from his 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 Poterat, as humans gain a greater understanding of God's creation and use it to better their condition. And, as already noted, the overenthusiastic, millenarian 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 articulate the logic of the Hebraic worldview.

More generally, it would appear that what Poteat calls the oral/aural logic of God's faithfulness 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.

A concrete example of the theoretical situation described above would in fact be the situation of the most successful 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. And 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

Alexis de 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 faithfulness, 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 Gunton’s theory is the most powerful of the approaches discussed in the first section of this paper, 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.

NOTES

1. Heidegger'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.
2. See 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).
3. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). For a somewhat different version of the argument that a mechanistic ontology is central to modernity see Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973) and *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
4. See Karl Lowith, *Reason in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) and Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). The summary that follows is taken primarily from *The New Science of Politics*.
5. This conclusion is developed more clearly in Voegelin's later writings. See, most importantly, *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1974), pp 239-271.
6. See Robert A. Segal, "Gnosticism, Ancient and Modern," in *Christian Century* (November 1995).
7. Expressive individualism is best described as an ethos of aesthetic self-expression; the fundamental goal of human existence for an expressive individualist is to achieve transcendence or perhaps even salvation through artistic creativity. The origins of expressive individualism can be seen in the romantic movement of the nineteenth century with its reaction to the desiccated rationalism of the Enlightenment and the banality and repression of everyday life in bourgeois capitalist society. It reached its logical conclusion in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and has more recently largely conquered the Western academy (or at least the humanities) in the form of postmodernism. Its most obvious manifestations in current popular culture are the godlike status of popular artists (such as entertainers and athletes) and the virtual eradication of any legal or even social restrictions on artistic expression over the past generation. (It could be argued that the expressive ethos has become dominant in postwar societies through, somewhat ironically, the capitalist economy, as the advertising industry has used essentially expressive appeals to create a consumer culture.) I think it could be argued that the consciousness underlying expressivism could be described, as would be the case with fascism, as ultimately one of disillusionment. Like fascism, expressive individualism first began to develop on a wide scale after World War I. And

it exploded in scope during the late 1960s and 1970s—that is, during a period when post-World War II dreams of social progress and justice had been dashed. As the goals of postwar reform liberalism and social democracy--such as the abolition of poverty, full racial integration, and meaningful participatory democracy--began to appear unattainable, the goals of the political left shifted quite quickly from social justice to individual expressive liberation.

8. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Michael Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

9. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), the second edition, which is considered definitive, was published in 1921; this translation is based on the sixth edition, published in 1928 and only slightly different than the second.

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

11. See 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. See also John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

12. See 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); it is the source for the following discussion. See also *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Clark, 2003).

13. See 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* (Np: 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). See also the very helpful analysis, which examines the evolution of Polanyi's political views, in Struan Jacobs and Phil Mullins, "Faith, tradition, and dynamic order: Michael Polanyi's liberal thought from 1941 to 1951" *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 120-131.

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

15. The basic textbook in the field is Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). Other important works by Ong include *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958);

The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967; reprint ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). Eric A. Havelock ranks with Ong as a preeminent scholar in the field. See *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963); *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976); *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to its Substance in Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); and *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). The earliest work by classical scholars is discussed in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). A crucial early study in this field was Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304-345. This article appeared later in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 27-84. Other studies by Goody include *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also J. C. Carothers, "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word," *Psychiatry* 22 (1959): 307-320.

16. See Havelock, *Preface to Plato*.

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

18. See 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.

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