

Some Theological Implications of Michael Polanyi's Philosophy of Knowing

Walter B. Mead, Professor Emeritus, Illinois State University

Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Polanyi Society

Atlanta, Georgia

November 21, 2015

I. The Task

Although I'll be addressing mostly those elements of Michael Polanyi's epistemology that are helpful in seeking an understanding of his -- at least implicitly held -- 'theology', I'll inevitably bring into our considerations also some of his ontological reflections. I say "inevitably" because these two facets of his philosophical thought are inextricably related: his ontology is thoroughly implicated in, by way of being essentially derived by way of the application of the principles and procedures of his epistemology. And, therefore, I think it will become clear in the course of this presentation that, to the extent that we *can* attribute a theology to Polanyi, we are able to do so primarily because of what the principles and procedures of his epistemology suggest to us.

The passion to explore and to discover constitutes a major and central feature of Polanyi's epistemology. And, even apart from a number of other important aspects of his epistemology that are pregnant with theological implications, this facet of his thought probably had at least as much influence upon his theological sensibilities as any other. Eventually this will lead us to raise the question: To what extent does Polanyi's inclusion of an intensely driven quest for knowing — indeed, a quest that he appears to regard, as, at least ideally, the highest of human aspirations — to what extent does this ultimate quest of man for knowledge serve as well (that is, with positive results) in the shaping of Polanyi's theology as it has done in the shaping of his epistemology? If we might assume the license of translating this into biblical metaphor: Does the fruit of the tree of knowledge, passionately sought, serve Polanyi as unexceptionably well in defining our spiritual quest as it appears to have done in his attempt to define the, arguably more mundane, processes and goals of our earthly quest for knowing. In regard to the latter — if I may be permitted recourse to a well-accepted myth— a falling apple is said to have triggered what, I think we would all agree, was a very fruitful (pun intended) inspiration in the mind of Sir Isaac Newton. However, it is my understanding that Newton's consequent laws of gravity, as well as they have served us to this day within the boundaries of exploring our mundane

existence, have not, in themselves, constituted a step forward (or upward) in our understanding of matters Divine. Whether or not Polanyi's explanation of the epistemological processes that appear to have guided Mr. Newton from initial inspiration to final theory offers to provide us with the means of advancing the way we approach our spiritual concerns remains for us to decide. It is my intention to suggest an answer to this question after addressing some preliminary issues.

One cannot but be impressed by the sheer number of essays that have been written by students of Polanyi in an attempt to gain an understanding of his views on religion and sometimes, more specifically, on Christian doctrine. It appears that the vast majority of these essays have been printed as well as archived on-line, by the North American Polanyi Society in its journal, *Tradition and Discovery* (hereafter referred to as *TAD*), from its start in 1972. And a considerable number of other essays dealing with Polanyi's, at least inferred, religious insights have appeared in the journals of the other two, more recently founded, groups concerned with Polanyian scholarship: the British journal, *Appraisal* (launched in 1996) and the Hungarian journal, *Polanyiana* (started in 1992). In addition, recently there has been an increasing number of doctoral dissertations exploring Polanyi's philosophical thought, some of them at least touching on what the authors perceive as theological implications of his thinking. Virtually all of the authors of these writings over the years have remarked about how rarely Polanyi appears to have, directly and explicitly, spoken or written about his own religious convictions, least of all anything as comprehensive as a theology. Indeed, in the more-than four hundred pages of his major philosophical work, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 1958 (hereafter referred to as '*PK*'), Polanyi mentions the word "God", at most, twenty times ("Jesus" only four or five times), and very few of these instances are within the context of a discourse extending more than a sentence or two. There is very little further mention of a deity, Christian or other, in Polanyi's other philosophical books and essays, and in some of them, no mention. Understandably, this has led virtually all of his students to ask "Why?"

In June of 1970 (only two years before Polanyi began to show signs of memory loss), I had the opportunity to visit with him for several hours spread over two days in the pleasant environment of Merton College at Oxford University. I had just completed a book manuscript in which I had quoted from Polanyi and, somewhat audaciously, expanded upon what I thought to be his intent. Therefore, I wanted to be assured by him that I had done justice to his intentions, and he graciously granted to me an

interview. On the first day of my visit, we were having lunch at a long table in the Great Hall of Merton College among a number of his former colleagues. (Polanyi, by then, had been retired for several years.) At one point, he leaned toward me and whispered that, at much as he had enjoyed his Oxford colleagues, precious few of them really understood, — and almost none of these agreed with — what he had been attempting to accomplish in his philosophical teaching, research, and writing during the previous two decades. His real support and following, he noted appreciatively, was in America. This was not surprising since the positivist/analytic approach that had clearly dominated British scholarship and had denigrated traditional normative (including theological) inquiry was considerably less influential on the American scene, although certainly not absent even there.

Indeed, Michael Polanyi had witnessed first-hand on the European continent, with the rise and conquests of the Nazi regime, the most extreme cultural and moral depravities. Hannah Arendt, from her perspective as a social and political scientist, viewed this as resulting as much from the successful control of minds by totalitarian propaganda as by the control of bodies by military force. Polanyi, from his deeply grounded moral and political perspective, and probing even more deeply, perceived this modern, moral depravity as the result of what he would label “moral inversion” -- namely, the attachment of the highest degree displaced moral fervor, once associated with the passionate devotion of a saint, to the most heinous actions; this itself, Polanyi noted, had been made possible by the emergence of a prior, academically encouraged and culturally tolerated perception that had reduced the human being to little more than a bundle of electro-chemical synaptic reflexes and, therefore, to be regarded as a creature no longer rightfully deemed a possessor of personal attributes -- in other words, no longer considered to be even human. The multiple mass exterminations of the twentieth century, beginning with the elimination of an estimated twenty million peasant farmers by Stalin's agricultural collectivization program, then Hitler's factory-modeled mass slaughter of about twelve million Jews, homosexuals, politically divergent and mentally deficient individuals, followed by an unprecedented number of exterminations in Mao's massive "Cultural Revolution" program, the massive ethnic exterminations in Rwanda, similar systematic exterminations in the former Burma, etc., were readily carried out by "ordinary men" who, for the most part, did not even consider themselves murderers because murder assumes the taking of another human life and these mass executioners did not even regard their victims as human! Acutely sensitive to this extreme depersonalization of man, Polanyi declared, on more than one occasion, that the chief challenge of his life was to provide a restored vision

of what it should mean to be a 'person'. And this goal he most assiduously and passionately pursued.

II. An Epistemology Capable of Embracing Both Science and Religion

I think that most people who have become conversant with Polanyi's philosophical thought would agree that his development of an epistemology that was able to embrace within its structure of knowing the entire spectrum of the disciplines of human thought, from mathematics and the so-called 'hard' sciences, at one end, to philosophy and theology, at the other, agree that this was his major contribution -- made possible by his radical insight that all knowing is either tacit or tacitly grounded, and rightly perceived as radical in its implications because the philosopher/theologian and the mathematician/scientist could no longer view each other as engaged in fundamentally alien enterprises. I hasten to add, however, that neither an awareness of this common grounding nor an appreciation of an ultimately similar pursuit among the practitioners of these generally assumed 'disparate' disciplines came very soon to characterize the understanding of either the professionals or the larger public. Indeed, even today, while there is gradually emerging some recognition of Polanyi's epistemological 'Copernican revolution' among a few, especially among those specialists whose minds have not been entirely captivated by their otherwise necessarily narrow focus on their tasks at hand, much more remains to be done by way of including this in the liberal education of those who, at least, have opened themselves to such insights by their very choice to engage in this type of education that, sadly, today is becoming increasingly overshadowed by educational programs designed to cater to students attracted to narrowly focused vocational training. Addressing this derailment of the educational goals, not only in the United States but also abroad, has been assumed to be a major responsibility and challenge by the Polanyi Societies to which I earlier alluded.

C. P. Snow, in 1959, was -- along with Polanyi -- among the earliest writers to challenge the dangerous polarization between the two cultures represented by the sciences and the humanities in his book, *The Two Cultures*, presented earlier the same year as a Rede Lecture at Cambridge University. Although I would not become aware of Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, published a year earlier, until several years later, I came across and read Snow's book almost immediately after its publication and was enthralled by its exposure and critique of the great cultural gulf, which the author traced to its beginning at the outset of modernity and the scientific revolution that

largely made possible and shaped the Enlightenment. As an undergraduate a few years earlier, I had set out to major in physics and mathematics since I'd developed some competence and confidence in those areas. However, my first exposure to philosophical thought in an introductory course during my freshman year alerted me to the fact that, while I had learned the language of math and science, the concepts of philosophy were an entirely new 'language' for me, and my reading from some of the great classical writings of philosophy made me want to learn much more of this intellectual legacy; therefore I declared philosophy as my major field of study, which led me subsequently to three years of theological studies, intervened by a year of serving an inner-city pastorate, subsequently ordination as a Methodist minister, and followed by further studies leading to a doctorate and a thirty-two-year teaching career in political philosophy, and occasional preaching from a variety of Protestant pulpits. Although politics interested me, I decided to pursue my major interest in philosophy in the context of a political studies doctoral program simply because positivist/behavioral reductionism, by then, had come to infect far more departments of philosophy than departments of politics and government.

Still, my original interest in the so-called 'hard' sciences remained, and my continued reading from both cultures treated by C.P. Snow made me an enthusiastic proponent of the interdisciplinary conversations that he advocated. When I finally read Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, I realized that, while the thinking of both authors provided an admirable attempt to bridge both cultures, Polanyi's program was the more radical. Snow encouraged us to learn the languages of different disciplines, and Polanyi supported this. After all, Polanyi, like Snow, had made a major career change, from that of a research scientist to that of a novelist, in Snow's case, and from a research scientist to a philosopher, in Polanyi's case. But, while the interdisciplinary 'bridging' achieved by Snow consisted of his learning a new 'language', namely that employed by writers of fiction, Polanyi's 'bridging' went far deeper to the discovery and examination of the common epistemological, specifically tacit, grounding shared by the 'hard' sciences and the humanities, indeed, by all fields of inquiry and discovery. Although Polanyi's discovery was not, in itself, sufficient to provide for communication among, and therefore an appreciative understanding of, specifically what the various professional practitioners were engaged in (as did Snow's program), it did -- without pretending to overcome the differences (and barriers) represented by the various disciplinary 'languages' -- for the first time, provide an opportunity for an understanding of what unites all of the disciplines at deeper (i.e., tacit) and more substantive (i.e., with profound ontological implications) level.

In regard, specifically, to our concern with theology, this fundamental connection provides for both a more 'spiritualized' understanding of, or transcendent dimension to, our mundane and temporal existence as well as a more world-affirming (some theologians might prefer the word 'incarnate' here) understanding of our spiritual, or transtemporal, dimension. And it accomplishes this by depicting our entire vast, empirically conceived, variety and range of inquiry and understanding, as lying along an epistemologically defined and commonly shared spectrum -- or gradient -- of inquiry, discovery, and knowing. (Note: Although I do not find Polanyi, in any of his writings, using either word, "spectrum" or "gradient", I have found that the latter term has also been employed by Robert John Russell in his essay "Polanyi's Enduring Gift to 'Theology and Science'" in *TAD*, v.35, no.3, 2008-2009.) Polanyi's valuable epistemological analysis of the disciplines whereby he distinguishes those at one end of the spectrum, e.g., the 'hard' sciences, in terms of their lesser degree of reliance on subsidiary elements that resist integration in terms of their focal, or explicit, comprehension, from those disciplines at the other end of the spectrum, such as philosophy and theology that, to a far greater degree resist such focal comprehension of their subsidiary tacit elements, and therefore consequently depend far more, for successful focal and explicit understanding and expression within their respective fields of inquiry, upon an active fiduciary commitment and embrace of the often elusive tacit elements encountered in their respective questing endeavors.

This had, for Polanyi, important implications in terms of his 'theology', to the extent that he gropingly attempted to construct a theology. And this, as his students readily note, had a considerable impact upon his attempt to give definition to this important area within the development and application of his epistemology (and its application to his ontology) and his attempts, with diverse and sometimes conflicting terms, to capture in his concept of the Transcendent, as well as in his reluctance, when confronted with the question, "Do you regard yourself as a Christian?" to give an affirmative answer despite his considerable dialogue with major Christian thinkers in the Moot and his formal affiliation with, first, Catholicism and, later, with Protestantism. In fact his answer to this particular questioner was a simple "No". But even this stark reply was followed by his confession that it was a *reluctant* denial, and this reluctance came, on other occasions, to be expressed in his inability to embrace certain Christologically related concepts, which we shall shortly take up. But first I must say something about his important understanding of what it means to be a person, and therefore the 'personal' aspect of his scheme of knowing.

III. Polanyi's Concept of 'Person'

One of the first questions I posed to Professor Polanyi in my conversation with him in Oxford, England, ("conversation" here to be understood as consisting, for the most part, of my avidly listening as Polanyi generously responded to my interposed questions) was in reference to his referring, somewhere in *PK*, to our tacit intimations as lying along a "gradient of discovery" in the sense that there appeared to be something of a 'top --> down', teleological influence at work here on the subsidiary and isolated particulars of our tacit awareness that tended to encourage and aid in the formation of a more comprehensive (i.e., more inclusive) and coherent - - therefore, not only a more epistemologically explicit, but also an ontologically higher -- level in his hierarchical structure of *both* knowing and being. Here, by the way (if I may diverge for the moment), is an example of what I referred to earlier as a closely implicative relationship between his epistemology and his ontology. This is suggested not only repeatedly in what he has written, but also in the very title he assigned to his *magnum opus*, *Personal Knowledge*, '*Personal*', as we shall see, being with primarily ontological import and '*Knowledge*', as we have already seen, conveying mainly epistemological significance; and this intimate relationship appears to have been equally appreciated, as well as more succinctly expressed, by Marjorie Grene, who edited a collection of Polanyi's philosophical essays in a book she chose to title, by her stark juxtaposition of two nouns, '*Knowing and Being*'.

But, to return to the question I was asking Polanyi, I was wondering whether the 'top --> down' teleological structure and dynamic of his epistemology and the related 'open boundary' conditions among the hierarchical levels, were intended to suggest not only a more comprehensive and coherent component, and therefore, as he himself clearly indicated, a higher, cosmically centered level above the human entity in his epistemological scheme, but also -- I suggested -- perhaps a level of influence and action -- to the extent that it exerted significant telic influence upon the human agent in his quest for knowledge -- which therefore relegated the significance of human decision, choice, and action to secondary significance.

Polanyi's response to me was immediate and clear: The significance of the agent's role in the process of discovery is immense. It is *she* or *he* who must make the choice of engaging in prolonged, laborious, and sometimes highly scorned, risky, and unproductive inquiry that, nevertheless, in the long run -- often after many years, even

a lifetime, when the search relates to the most fundamental and important questions - offers not only partial explicit glimpses, but also the all-important intimation of tacit resources that finally coalesce and open the way to further fruitful pursuit. Still, this pursuit of knowledge, if seriously undertaken, and especially in regard to the most fundamental questions of human existence, remains a risky pursuit that often requires considerable courage. But the hope of attaining satisfying answers, or at least contributing to some future generations' reaching that goal, provides sufficient incentive to the person who has both courage and vision. (Polanyi's stress upon the lifetime investment required for the achievement of answers, however partial and fallible, to the more 'global' questions, reminded me of Plato's caution in his *Republic*, that even after undergoing a most rigorous engagement in his decades-long program of studies, one should not assume that he is qualified to be a philosopher until *at least* the age of fifty, an age that people in Plato's time, on average, seldom attained . . . even unabated by hemlock!)

It is the capacity to make choices among, and to be guided by, tacit intimations that appear to point the way toward greater and more comprehensive knowledge as well as the mental satisfaction that accompanies this that appears to be central to Polanyi's understanding of what distinguishes human life from non-human forms of life. But we would be remiss to overlook a moral aspect that is equally definitive of this intellectual quest and therefore, equally *definitive* of what it means to be a person. The passions that drive this quest are essentially moral passions. Indeed, in the earliest of Polanyi's book-length treatments of epistemology (*Science, Faith and Society* [1946], hereafter referred to as *SFS*), Polanyi speaks specifically of the defining importance of conscience. Speaking of those who are seemingly content with the material satisfactions of a well-ordered society and, therefore oblivious of, and consequently insensitive to, the sense of intellectual fulfillment and gratification available to those who are passionately engaged in the quest for greater knowledge, Polanyi observes that this latter and much higher quest

would seem to call for an extension in the direction towards God. If the intellectual and moral tasks of society rest in the last resort on the free consciences of every generation, and these are continually making essentially new additions to our spiritual heritage, we may well assume that they are in continuous communication with the same source which first gave men their society-forming knowledge of abiding things. How near that source is to God I shall not try to

conjecture. But I would express my belief that modern man will eventually return to God through the clarification of his cultural and social purposes. Knowledge of reality and the acceptance of obligations which guide our consciences, once firmly realized, will reveal to us God in man and society. (*SFS*, 83-84.)

Throughout his writings, Polanyi, aware of man's limitations as well as his aspiration for eternal meaning, and equally aware of his own inability, as a mere mortal being, to have any adequate conception of what constitutes an "image of God," therefore ends up not with the Christian presumption that we can meaningfully speak of humans "created in the image of God", but instead with a practical acceptance of a sense of meaning sufficient for his mortal and brief existence in this world. In man's modern stage of evolution, man

aspires to eternal meaning, but owing to the finitude of man's condition, it too remains blatantly incomplete. Yet the precarious foothold gained by man in the realm of ideas lends sufficient meaning to his brief existence; the inherent instability of man seems to me adequately supported and certified by his submission to ideals which I believe to be universal. (*PK*, 389)

Therefore, it appears that Polanyi's understanding of personhood in regard to not only its highest aspirations but also its realizable achievements involves more than the epistemological pursuit of answers, It involves also, and even more importantly, being guided by moral values. However, eight years later, in *The Tacit Dimension*, he surprisingly declares that his understanding of what is at the core of human personhood and what, therefore, is fully deserving of respect, does not require one's being guided by moral values and apparently not even actually having a "moral sense" but only the recognition of one's *potential* for holding and acting in accordance with such values:

[At] the highest level of personhood we meet man's moral sense, guided by the firmament of his standards. Even when this appears absent, its mere possibility is sufficient to demand our respect. (*TD*, 51.)

I must admit I do not understand why Polanyi settles for such a minimalist definition of what distinguishes the human being from lower life forms, but at the level of the most abstract theoretical observation of drawing such a distinction between man and beast, it is at least accurate, if not edifying! Perhaps Polanyi merely wished to be all-inclusive, intent upon not excluding those who, despite their acting in a bestial manner, were not technically (i.e., biologically) beasts. Fortunately, most of his discussions on the subject of personhood, since he clearly considered it to be the pinnacle of the entire process of evolution, set a far higher standard for both the capstone of his ontological hierarchy of earthly existence and for social emulation.

IV. Polanyi's Concept of Transcendence: Personal, or Merely Cosmological?

In the course of our several hours of conversation over the space of two days in Oxford, I took the opportunity — sometimes while we dined, at other times while we sat on a bench on the edge of the Merton College green, and even (on the second afternoon) while I drove him to pick up his dry cleaning — to suggest to him what I thought might be some unstated theological implications of his far more explicit epistemology. Polanyi spent the vast majority of our time together dealing with the personhood and role of the agent. And he emphasized, as I have indicated, that the importance of the initiative, judgments, risk taking, and role of the agent must not be underestimated, for answers do not simply fall from the heavens above. At the same time, anyone seriously engaged in the quest for knowledge, is by its guidance within a heuristic universe, or field, with its gradient of discovery, and its own impelling and directive center, is inevitably aware of the external and transcendent dimension of the heuristic dynamic.

In regard to the spiritual implications of Polanyi's epistemology, I was proposing to him that the teleological, top —> down dynamic of his epistemological hierarchy and the related "open boundary" conditions among the hierarchical levels, seemed to suggest to me that the heuristic guidance provided to the participant in his quest for knowledge appeared to be not only innate to the human person and his humanly evolved moral precepts, but perhaps also appeared to emanate from some qualitatively transcending entity, beyond all orders of creation, including man himself and even his most evolved scheme of moral values. Is not this, I suggested, what we have commonly referred to as the transcending 'spiritual' dimension beyond all of our knowing and being, and even, to a considerable extent, beyond the reach of that scholarly pursuit which we have called "theological inquiry"?

Polanyi displayed a reluctance to accept any 'ready-made' doctrinal formulation of Christian belief that did not ring true to his own philosophical understanding, which proposed as the most compelling concept of reality that which suggested the greatest potential for producing an indeterminate number and range of future insights and comprehensions, or revelations. These were clearly not the theological brand of 'Revelations' that emanate largely from 'above', but instead are the product of intense human reflection and collaboration, sometimes representing years, even generations, of indwelling inquiry and openness. Still, he was impressed by the Pauline concept of grace and redemption. He appeared to understand the theological concept of 'grace' as the gift of human insight and understanding, and redemption the sense of being freed from mundane worries and distractions and, therefore, open to the gift, or grace, of unexpected insights. 'Hope' was also part of his philosophical/theological vocabulary, a kind of optimistic expectation of, or openness to, discovery and the gratification that accompanies discovery. But even in his vocabulary suggestive of similarities to some of meanings of related terms in Christianity, the definitions he associated with these terms usually included a somewhat groping but implied reference to a cosmic field or even more abstract cosmology. I've already quoted some of his 'theologically climactic' conclusion to his *Personal Knowledge*, but it bears repetition in the present context:

We may envisage then a cosmic field which called forth all these centres [i.e., human beings] by offering them a short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity of making some progress of their own towards an unthinkable consummation. And that is also, I believe, how a Christian is placed when worshipping God. (*PK*, 405)

Personal, or merely cosmological? You decide. But it occurs to me that, if I had the opportunity to converse with Polanyi today, I would suggest to him that -- given his treatment of the concept of the person as the highest tribute he could assign to any entity, might it not be appropriate to assign -- as has been the age-old practice in all three "religions of the Book", i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to this otherwise elusive entity the attribute of personhood, lacking as we do, any concept more — or even as — adequate? If we interpret this attribute to God not literally, but metaphorically, in doing so we are saying, "Of course He is not a person as we understand that concept in our more quotidian life among other finite, mortal, and flawed beings. We are not anthropomorphizing the Divine." But when we apply this

term to God and understand it as metaphor, we are saying that we use it because it is the most lofty concept that we know in our quotidian parlance. However, the modern and post-modern process of depersonalizing not only the human being -- which is what Polanyi has defined as his responsibility to challenge, but also the equally modern and post-modern contentment with depersonalizing God, for example, by denigrating him with the loftiest conceptualization of which the "Starwars" culture is capable in its completely mechanistic concept of "the FORCE", also needs to be challenged. But this is not provided by the Polanyian structure of epistemology and its ontologica/theological implications which, by its author's own admission of his inability to combat modernity's and post-modernity's open combat with even a metaphorical attribution of Personal Being to this Pinnacle of all Being.

Perhaps the Jewish tradition of recognizing the boundaries of the human mind and the incapacity of all language, even metaphor, to do complete justice to what Polanyi rightly recognized as the inherent elusiveness of an infinite God, offers us some clue to why he generally fell silent when others encouraged him to make explicit what they sensed as possibly implicit in the lofty ascent of his ontological scheme that, like his epistemology, rose to the height of humanity's most exalted moral (some would credibly suggest, even 'spiritual') aspirations. Still, Polanyi groped to give more adequate articulation to what he considered the pinnacle of both of these facets of his philosophizing. Central to both was the concept of an attracting and organizing *center* that provided both a directional prompting of the mind toward, and a sense of an approaching proximity to, discovery. These are the characteristics he assigns to his term 'heuristic field': "We assume that the gradient of a discovery, measured by the nearness of discovery, prompts the mind towards it." (*PK*, 403) He also, on several occasions, makes use of Teilhard de Chardin's term '*noosphere*' in referring to the "lasting articulate framework of thought", that has enabled "man's sudden rise from mute beasthood" and, by its further evolution, promises to enable his further evolvment. (*PK*, 388) As he neared the end of his major work, Polanyi brought the two concepts of 'field center' and 'noosphere' together.

. . . I have surveyed the gradual rise of field centres to the rank of full personhood, and I have again spoken of this rise when illustrating some aspects of emergence by the logical maturation of the mind from infancy to adulthood. At all levels of life it is these centres which take the risks of living and believing. And it is still such centres which, at the highest stage of development, actuate those men who seek

the truth and declare it to all comers -- at all costs.

The point is reached here at which the observer's appraisal of biological achievement turns into his submission to the leadership of superior minds. This corresponds to the extrapolation of biology into ultra-biology, where the appraisal of living beings merges into an acknowledgement of the ideals transmitted by our intellectual heritage.

This is the point at which the theory of evolution finally bursts through the bounds of natural science and becomes entirely an affirmation of man's ultimate aims. For the emergent noosphere, wholly determined as that which we believe to be true and right; it is the external pole of our commitments, the service of which is our freedom. . . It comprises everything in which we may be totally mistaken. (Ibid.)

In his next two paragraphs, Polanyi, still groping to find adequate terminology for his highest and apparently transcending as well as actively attracting center of our ultimately moral knowing and being, describes his pinnacle of the heuristic field as a "cosmic field" of "universal standards" that are "timeless":

...the phylogenetic centres which formed our own primeval ancestry have now produced -- by a deployment which, when compared with the long ages of life on earth, looks like a single sudden outburst -- a life of the mind which claims to be guided by universal standards. By this act a prime cause emergent in time has directed itself at aims that are timeless. (Ibid.)

Polanyi's characterizations of the transcending agency that lures us on -- reliably to the extent that we grasp its vision -- are offered to us in terms of the concepts of an "active center" within a "heuristic field", a "noosphere", and a "cosmic field" -- all of these seemingly of a strictly impersonal nature. But he has also introduced the word "spiritual" to this medley of attributes. Still one must wonder why the word "personal" does not enter in, given the years he spent in the Moot in dialogue with some of the outstanding Christian theologians of the twentieth century -- e.g., Oldham, Tillich, and

Niebuhr. And especially since he had set as his major goal the defining of personhood. By recognizing our metaphoric attribution of personhood to God we are, in effect saying, “Yes, God is more adequately represented as person than as an impersonal entity such as “Force”, but in speaking of God as Person, we are actually acknowledging that God is at least this much, but actually much more than any attribute, or set of attributes, can adequately convey.

As many people who knew Polanyi have reported, he felt considerable uneasiness in discussing his spiritual beliefs with others. Indeed, where we do find records of his spiritual outlook — mostly in the sporadic and sparse references in his own writings, it seems to me that they are best described as groping and, over time, inconsistent. But feeling that I have a fairly good sense of Polanyi, I’m inclined to interpret his hesitations and apparent inconsistencies in a positive light. In fact, my impression of Polanyi’s interest in the realm of the Transcendent and his occasional attempts at explicit expression on the subject as marked by a deep curiosity and complete integrity, just as the rest of his intellectual quests are appropriately so characterized. I tried to draw him out on his religious thought by suggesting to him what appeared to me to be implied, sometimes quite tacitly, from his philosophical rumination in other areas of concern. Toward the end of our first day of conversation at Oxford, Polanyi expressed considerable delight that we had a number of experiences where our conversation had taken a turn toward the spiritual. I remember, almost verbatim, a fairly summary comment he made to me when he, in an almost jovial mood, said to me (obviously with some paraphrasing): “I appreciate your taking the direction you have in trying to draw out some of the religious implications of my philosophizing. Because I’ve not had much *training in such matters*, *I have been reluctant to go very far in that direction*. So I hope you will continue in this endeavor.” I replied to him that I certainly would. For several months after I returned we exchanged a few letters. Two years after our visit, I received some messages from him in which it was clear that he was confusing me with Bill Scott, and v.v. Bill (I first got to know Bill in my final year [1959-60] at Yale Divinity School, when he, on sabbatical leave from Smith College, was engaged in graduate studies at Yale and lived just a few steps down the residence hall, in Seabury House, from me. We had some interesting conversations, but little did I suspect that our paths would recross 41 years later when I finally discovered and became active in the Polanyi Society and that he, together with Marty Molesk would co-author the most scholarly and comprehensive biography of Michael Polanyi. *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher*, 2005.)

I want to follow up on a question I raised near the beginning of this essay, namely: How successful has Polanyi's brilliant epistemology been in being applied to the field of theology? For the most part, I think it has encouraged inquiry into all areas of study and exploration and, because of the kinship of Polanyi's key epistemological principles (I have in mind such epistemological concepts of his as 'faith' (i.e., trusting one's tacit intimations), "commitment", "downward causation", "indwelling", "breaking in" and "breaking out", "open boundaries", etc., Polanyi's thoughts have had a special attraction to those engaged in religious studies. However, I also suspect that some of Polanyi's reluctance to pursue very far the application of his epistemological methodology to theological inquiry, is that the Polanyian epistemology is driven by a passion to discover and, while more than willing to admit, is not inclined to embrace the presence of insurmountable barriers. Taking seriously the sense of a God who is mostly unknowable (see, for example, the magnificent work by the Russian Orthodox theologian, S.L. Frank, *The Unknowable: An Ontological Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 1983.) I feel that I must not only acknowledge mystery as a major characteristic of the God I can admire and worship, but I must be able also to embrace that mystery. My sense is that, as a man of great integrity, Polanyi could not readily embrace the kind of God that is too often represented in the often either domesticated or mythical expressions of Christian dogma. He seemed to take some comfort and delight in the Christian presentation of a 'God with a human face.' But, I think he agreed with me, and those more accomplished interpreters of Christian history (e.g., Bart Ehrmann) that have provided convincing scholarly evidence that Christian doctrine, too often, had originally been created and subsequently accepted for reasons having, at best, little to do with a well-grounded and responsibly thought out theology. On the other hand, Professor Ehrmann and other scholars of Christian history, have convincingly argued that Christianity probably would not have succeed in becoming such a widely embraced religion, capable of being popularly embraced and therefore capable of being conveyed down to our time through centuries characterized by mass illiteracy, had it not been embellished by magic and theological fantasy. Polanyi was not ready to compromise the integrity of his mind to accommodate such doctrines that have come to be accepted on flimsy historical evidence that, in most other areas of historical and documentary scrutiny, would not gain credibility among competent scholars. This is not to discredit the valuable, creative, and imaginative insights within Christianity that are most appropriately expressed in terms of myth and metaphor, but only to question those, especially numerous among contemporary adherents of the faith, who are inclined to convert the mythical and metaphorical idiom into literal representation. One must ask

whether the historical conveyance of Christianity and therefore its very availability to future generations still depend upon such attractive misrepresentations. I am inclined to suggest instead, and I think that Polanyi would have agreed, that in this period of relatively wide-spread literacy, the more arcane and distorted representations of first century Christianity through the politically and empirically encouraged pronouncements of the bishops, called by the Emperor to enunciate compilations of religious doctrine that would provide an ideological foundation for the unification of the Roman Empire.

Polanyi did find much of value in the Pauline letters as well as in the teachings of Jesus. But the positive influence that Jesus had on the life and the thinking of Polanyi was not predicated on the claim that Jesus was "fully God and Fully man." Knowing that some of the Christian doctrines had credible and compelling evidence to support their authenticity, Polanyi had the integrity and the courage to accept a number of them. But the same epistemological and evidential standards led to Polanyi's refusing to deny certain doctrines that he could not, in honesty, accept.