

Comments on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Michael Polanyi

John C. Polanyi

[EDITOR'S NOTE: *Professor John C. Polanyi, a son of Michael Polanyi who became a Nobel Laureate in 1986, made the following remarks on the occasion of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association Commemorative Conference in Budapest, Hungary in August of 1991.]*

I am grateful for this opportunity to re-establish contact with a nation that I knew best before I was born. I have no doubt that through my parents I owe a great deal to this city and this country.

My father, Michael Polanyi, whose centennial is celebrated this year, was the youngest child of Hungarian parents, themselves born in the middle of the last century. My father went to school and to university in Budapest. He served as a junior officer in the Austro-Hungarian army in the First World War.

Following a brief period in the Ministry of Health in Count Karolyi's government, he went to Germany to pursue a career in scientific research. At that time Germany was the world capital for science, as the United States is today.

From the age of about twenty-nine and for the remaining fifty years of his active life, he travelled widely, but almost never to Hungary. His home for over forty years was England, a country which he loved. But he continued in his heart to honour the liberal and creative Hungary that he had known, and the Europe that he feared had passed into history.

Few people have thought as profoundly and passionately about the tragedy of Europe as he did. He laid that tragedy at the door of perverted science. In summarizing his views in this fashion I use words that he might not have used, but I do not think that I distort his ideas greatly by doing so.

The National Socialists (the Nazi's) in Germany, and the Marxists in the Soviet Union -- each of whom engulfed this country in horror -- held to the view that what was not part of science could not sensibly be regarded as existing. It followed that morality did not exist, except as a remnant of outdated superstitions. Truth, justice, and tolerance had been, they believed, shown to be mere impediments to scientific progress.

This was a flagrant distortion of reality. The fact is that science owes its power to its commitment to precisely these values. Science respects opinions which are honestly held -- and not because of the race, religion, or social class

of the individual who holds the view. Science flourishes only to the extent that it respects the individual and tolerates dissent. Justice is served by requiring each new scientific proposition to prove itself before the court of scientific opinion.

Science does not need to levy fines or impose prison sentences on those who fail to acknowledge the curvature of the earth or the existence of atoms. The truth, if it is indeed the truth, does not need to be established at the point of a bayonet. Nor, if it is not the truth, will a bayonet make it true.

Far from validating the horrors of the recent past, science, with the other arts, has provided a rallying point for opposition to tyranny. And far from embracing science, the tyrants of this new age have found themselves at war with science -- attempting to discredit scientific leaders (Einstein, Pauling, Sakharov, and now Fang Lizhi).

The renaissance of Europe is a marvel my father sensed, but never saw. That renaissance does not mean that history is over. Civilised values will continue to be threatened for the rest of time. Not by barbarians so much as misguided idealists, who in their impatience and ignorance urge us to jettison civilised values. We will continue to need individuals with the wisdom to warn us of these hazards. Michael Polanyi was such a one, I believe.