

# An Alternative Form of Theological Knowing

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ABSTRACT Key Words: liturgy, theology, post-critical, deconstruction, Polanyi, personal, knowing, epistemology.

*This essay seeks to incorporate Polanyi's post-critical conception of knowing more fully into theology by emphasizing that all knowing is a personal activity rooted in a particular place. While deconstruction describes itself as post-critical, its assumption that all knowledge is a social "construct" and/or an instrument of social coercion fails to account for the involvement of the person in all acts of knowing. A more genuine post-critical approach takes seriously the cohesion between the knower and*

Mind and matter, meaning and its incarnation, are at bottom inseparable, for they are consanguine creatures of the figuring powers of our mindbodies.

William H. Poteat

*A Philosophical Daybook, 95*

How did human beings come to feel that some of the movements they make with their bodies could comment upon others, forgetting that the movements 'commented upon' ('meant,' 'referred to,' 'represented,' 'stood for,' 'designated,' and so on) are just that, movements themselves?

David Sudnow

*Talk's Body, 56*

Polanyi's conception of knowledge as personal — that the knower participates in all acts of knowing, and that the knower passionately contributes to what is being known — has radical implications both for the content of knowledge (what is known) and, more importantly, for the forms of knowledge (how the knower is dwelling in the world). What and how we know are deeply intertwined. One's personal dwelling place, where one is in the world, such as an apprentice in the presence of a master, shapes and forms what one comes explicitly to know.

My essay relates Polanyi's approach directly to theology. An alternative form of theological knowing implies that the primary forms of knowing often weighted in theology have failed to absorb Polanyi's post-critical philosophy. While Polanyi's philosophy has apparently been absorbed, its implications are only superficially acknowledged. Few theologians today would want to defend objectivism. Certainly the recent emphasis on knowledge as "social construction" — whether the focus is race, gender, or culture — assumes that objectivism is no longer viable. And yet, the current rush toward social, racial, gender, etc. analysis indicates a disturbing academic desperation. I mean by this that theology (and religious studies) is losing, if not already has lost, a sense of place. While objectivism as a form of theological knowing is decried, an alternative that accounts for how we come to know, how we personally participate in theological knowing, has yet to be offered. If anything,

the current shifts in “postmodernist”/ deconstructionist theology, which assume religion is social coercion, erase the personal because such accounts do not take seriously the fiduciary nature of knowing. This inability to offer an alternative account of the theological knowing results from failing to come to terms with Polanyi’s central thesis: that knowledge is personal.

Yet how is theological knowledge personal? By using “personal” to describe knowledge, Polanyi describes not only the content of knowledge, but also our way of knowing, or as I am calling it in this essay, our form of knowing. And our form of knowing invariably assumes that we are some place. A truly coherent theology requires an account of this fact. This is the purpose of my essay.

## What is “form”?

I want first to elaborate on what I mean by “form,” an elaboration I believe to be consonant with Polanyi’s approach. Generally speaking, I mean by “form,” the place from which we are oriented. “Form” refers to how we shape, extend our own person, and thus participate in what we seek to know. To use Polanyi’s language, “form” refers to that on which we rely subsidiarily rather than what we attend to focally. From this standpoint, we could say the form of a builder is his reliance on a hammer, on his skill as a builder, and on his bodily memories of having hammered before, so that he may achieve the focal goal of getting the nail into the wall.

Since we necessarily rely on our way or form of knowing, it is impossible strictly to separate the knowing “form” from the known content. Such an effort would be like trying to sculpt a figure with no material. Form and content rely upon and inform each other. A friend of mine, for example, was overwhelmed by the difference between listening to an opera over the radio and attending an opera performed on stage. The richness and depth of the opera performed at the Lyric Operahouse — with the entire drama of romance and tragedy acted and sung before your eyes, with the colorful costumes and the energetic bodily movements — is a different form of knowing than listening to the opera on the radio. The interpretive framework relied upon when attending to the stage opera provides a certain depth to the operatic reality which is not apparent when listening to the opera by radio.<sup>1</sup> If the only way we knew about opera were by radio, our conception of what “opera” is would be entirely different.

The Nixon/Kennedy Presidential debates are an example of the inseparable relation between form and content in the political sphere. Those who saw the debates on TV had a different impression of who “won” the debate than those who had listened to it over the radio. Those who watched it on TV — and relied upon the gestures of the candidates, the look in their eyes, their posture, their perspiration, etc. to shape their knowing — thought Kennedy won, whereas those who heard only the candidates’ voices assumed Nixon had won. Such differences in interpretations of content suggest that how we place ourselves vis-a-vis the focus of our knowing shapes the content of that focus.

Polanyi addresses this interrelation of form and content when he discusses the co-extension of knowing and being. He offers as an example our reliance on a probe in our search for something, we may not know exactly what. Yet we nonetheless trust that the how of our knowing, our form, which is our reliance on the probe among other things, will yield results. And our form of knowing will, of course, shape what we come to know. Polanyi goes so far as to claim that we make the probe or stick “parts of ourselves for reaching beyond them.”<sup>2</sup> Knowing and being are so intimately related that “if an act of knowing affects our choice between alternative frameworks, or modifies the framework in which we dwell, it involves a change in our way of being.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus “form” is the grip we have on the world, our imaginative reach as we seek to know, “the extension of our fingers that grasp [the probe].” Philologists, in fact, trace the root of “form” back to one of two options: ferire, which means “to strike,” or dharmar, which means “to hold.” These roots capture a deep and basic

meaning: our form of knowing is our hold on the world, how we strike out towards that which we seek to know.

Like Polanyi, Kant, also attempting to limit the thoroughgoing objectivism of his day, redescribes our form of knowing. In contrast to Polanyi, however, Kant holds that our form of knowing is due to the mind. Though our forms of knowing reside primarily in the structure of the mind, Kant holds that we can only know these forms in experience. “The pure concepts of the understanding must, to be sure, have their source in the nature of the mind, but this does not mean that they are brought about by the object or that they produce the objects.”<sup>4</sup> Kant thus limits objectivism by asserting that human beings do not have access to things as they are in themselves. Like Polanyi, Kant seeks to limit an absolute objectivism (and subjectivism) by speaking of the “condition of the possibility of knowing,” but for Kant these conditions (which are “both present in all experience and conditions of the validity of all experience”<sup>5</sup>) are ultimately mental, located in the structure of the mind. In contrast, Polanyi does not locate our reliance, our form of knowing, in the structure of the “mind,” abstractly conceived. Polanyi would agree with Wittgenstein who claimed that to imagine that knowing is primarily “mental” causes us to stand on dangerous ground. As Ludwig Wittgenstein has suggested, “One of the most dangerous of ideas for a philosopher is, oddly enough, that we think with our heads or in our heads. The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, gives [the philosopher] something occult.”<sup>6</sup> Knowing, for Polanyi, is contingent not on the thinking subject as it confronts the thought object, but on personal participation.

Thus for Polanyi, the emphasis on “personal,” “participation,” “indwelling,” etc. indicates the scientist is not primarily a “subject” observing detached “objects.” Rather a process of tacit absorption and incorporation is always going on. Polanyi would have certainly found congenial the comments of Noble Prize recipient Joshua Lederberg, whose discoveries established the genetics of microorganisms. Lederberg rather bizarrely describes his own scientific endeavors:

One needs the ability to strip to the essential attributes of some actor in a process, the ability to imagine oneself inside a biological situation; I literally had to be able to think, for example, ‘What would it be like if I were one of the chemical pieces in a bacterial chromosome?’ - and try to understand what my environment was, try to know where I was, try to know when I was supposed to function in a certain way, and so forth.<sup>7</sup>

The form of Lederberg’s knowing, the how of his knowing, is his ability to dwell inside the world of the bacterial chromosome. As Polanyi points out so thoroughly, the “objectivist” picture of knowing causes us to overlook how we ourselves are rooted in our knowing. Our commitments, passions and judgments not only “contribute” to the content of our knowing, but are themselves the source of knowing. Such commitments and judgments do not reside “in the head” but rather are that on which as embodied knowers we rely.

## A Malformed Theology

As I suggested in the introduction, most “postmodernist” theology today fails to fully absorb Polanyi’s post-critical philosophy. Certainly such theology has shifted away from objectivism (and subjectivism) and sought to acknowledge its own social and historical context. Some have suggested, in fact, that there is too much emphasis on place or perspective, i.e., theology is too self-consciously feminist, political, or minority cultural. Yet this understanding of historical/social place to overcome objectivism is not post-critical in Polanyi’s sense. This failure is most evident in the postmodernist/ deconstructionist assumption that truth claims are assertions of power. I want to claim that this theology is not radically different from the conception of knowing that supports objectivism: both approaches fail to come to terms with Polanyi’s notion that knowledge is personal.

While some might regard deconstruction as an intellectual movement that is passing, its continued pervasive influence, even among those who do not explicitly endorse deconstruction, suggests it has not been entirely rejected. Theology as deconstruction operates out of two premises: (1) a “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>8</sup> towards all previous theological “constructs,” and (2) the tendency to regard religion/theology as an instrument of social coercion. Since from this perspective, knowledge equals power, theology is often regarded as a partisan weapon used by the powerful to control the powerless. Thus, theology’s task is to deconstruct and unmask various oppressive ideologies. Since we are all “socially constructed,” there is no universal truth, and claims to such are oppressive and imperialistic.<sup>9</sup> Paul Mankowski describes the various manifestations of this approach at the 1992 American Academy of Religion:

The notion of religion as an instrument of social coercion was hardly restricted to this group (“Violence, Victimization, and Social Control”); indeed, it served as one of the leitmotifs of the meeting: in its overt realizations, as in the paper titled “Exorcism as a Means of Christian Social Control,” and in its covert forms, as discussed in “HIV-Antibody Testing as an Exercise of Socio-political Power.”<sup>10</sup>

This interpretive framework devours all theological truth claims and its seductive powers are far-reaching. For example, the appendix of ethicist Stanley Hauerwas’s latest book, *After Christendom?* includes a letter from a graduate student who endorses this framework. While agreeing with Hauerwas’ pacifist stance, the student asks, “Is there not already a violence implicit in the conviction that one possesses the truth . . . ?”<sup>11</sup> The student argues that any claim to truth oppresses because it necessarily excludes. While rightly rejecting objectivism, the student assumes that truth claims are then subjective assertions of power. Thus he can quote and agree with Nietzsche, “‘The truthful man ends up realizing that he has never stopped lying.’ This seems right to me.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, such a view logically leads to muteness, which is precisely what the student suggests: “As I understand the Mennonite witness, silence may indeed play a role . . . perhaps Christians should learn to shut up.”<sup>13</sup> Hauerwas apparently accepts the student’s thesis and responds by saying “the way of nonviolence is never easy and+ our language can embody that violence in ways that we hardly knew.”<sup>14</sup>

The problem with this framework, however, is that both the student and Hauerwas give away whatever ground they are standing on. If indeed there is “a violence implicit in the conviction that one possesses the truth,” isn’t the graduate student’s letter “violent”? If silence is the appropriate response in the face of inherent violence, why did he write the letter? In his writings, Hauerwas insightfully argues for the “truthfulness” of Christianity. Yet if one accepts the premise that claims to truth are essentially oppressive since such claims are assertions of power, then how can one hold any claim as true? This deconstructionist line of argument points to an infinite regress which means that the deconstructionist herself could not claim deconstruction to be true. It remains a logically incoherent position. Marjorie Grene’s criticism of Darwinian naturalism applies to deconstruction as well: “there is surely something wrong in a theory which, at its very root, invalidates itself.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while this postmodernist position turns from objectivism and seeks to recover a social/historical place, this position, like objectivism, ultimately fails as a critical theory because it remains caught in dilemmas inherited from objectivism, albeit in a different guise. And what are these dilemmas? In short form, they include the following, which are interrelated: 1) a failure to account for the knower’s own commitments and judgments, 2) an appeal to a scientific social analysis to validate moral passions which go undeclared, 3) a failure to acknowledge the necessarily committal nature of all knowing and 4) a denial of what the universal intent or reach of knowing (which Polanyi distinguishes from established universality).

I will expand on these in turn with an eye to showing how deconstruction retains a conception of knowledge as impersonal. Those referred to earlier who are “hermeneutically suspicious” fail fully to address how they

know and judge where to insert the knife blade of suspicion. For example, while the author of the letter to Hauerwas is certainly in part right about his charges of the abuse of power and “social coercion,” at the same time he fails to come to terms with how he knows that he himself is not being coerced. In claiming that knowing is determined by social position, or political interest, he fails to account for his own personal participatory nature of knowing.

It is precisely because of this failure to come to terms with the personal participatory nature of all knowing, that there is likewise a failure to acknowledge one’s moral passions and their sources. The graduate student in the letter ultimately cannot say why he or anyone should care about violence done to others; quite literally, in his own terms, he cannot say since, as mentioned earlier, he recommends silence. At this point, Polanyi’s description of Marxism as a form of moral inversion rings true for this deconstructionist theology as well. In his analysis, Polanyi notes that Marxism interprets truth and morality within a utilitarian framework. Such an interpretation “accuses all moral sentiments of hypocrisy, while the moral indignation which the writer thus expresses is safely disguised as a scientific statement.”<sup>16</sup> Morality is denied any intrinsic force of its own (“the truthful man ends up realizing he has never stopped lying”) while at the same time an appeal is made to moral passions.<sup>17</sup> Since such passions remain obscure, however, they are safe against “unmasking.”<sup>18</sup> Similar to Marxism, the deconstructionist position implicitly appeals to the moral passions inspired by such concepts as equality and justice, but these goods are cut off from the history and traditions which make sense of them, since these traditions are seen as oppressive. What gets explicitly declared is a scientific social analysis which interprets all morality and truth as mere rationalizations for power. Such a position “enables the modern mind, tortured by moral (or religious) self-doubt, to indulge its moral passions in terms which also satisfy its passion for ruthless objectivity+”<sup>19</sup> The modern mind is so tortured precisely because, abstracted from its knowing ground, it is unable to account for its moral passions.

The above two dilemmas lead us to the third interrelated reason that deconstruction fails as a critical theory; namely, such a position ignores the necessarily committal or fiduciary nature of all knowing. By equating knowledge with power, such a position ignores that knowing is a “fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms.”<sup>20</sup> As Polanyi readers well know, to ignore the fact that we hold some beliefs acritically is to imagine that we are disembodied: that we have “virgin minds,” which bear “the imprint of no authority must be taught no language, for speech can be acquired only a- critically,” and which results finally in a state of imbecility.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, then, to imagine that all knowledge or language, shaped by tradition, is oppressive or violent is tacitly to assume that we are disembodied or purely spiritual beings.

At this point we are led to the forth dilemma that deconstruction fails to come to terms with: namely, that our acts of knowing have a universal intent or reach. As Polanyi noted, the distal term is present, not as a static entity (as in a correspondence view of meaning, which deconstruction rightly attacks) nor as a mere “construct” in which the subject arbitrarily asserts something to be the case; rather, within a Polanyian framework, the real is evolving, dynamic, and heuristic. “A new theory that claims to be real anticipates by this claim an indefinite range of future, as yet unknown, manifestations.”<sup>22</sup> For Polanyi, our knowing has a universal reach or intent because it has the possibility to open up a range of heretofore unknown dimensions of reality. Yet this is not an established universality, true once and for all, since the nature of the real always involves personal participation and commitment.

Thus, Polanyi’s alternative move out of subjectivism and objectivism applies not only to the objectivism of science but also to what I have called the objectivism of deconstruction. In his use of “personal” and “commitment” Polanyi abandons the classic dichotomies such as subject and object, and “in their places have been put alternative logical structures such as subsidiary- focal, attending-from — attending-to+”<sup>23</sup> This tacit

dimension of knowing, which is embodied in all knowing, is not an option that can be chosen or unchosen at will. As I described earlier, no one rides this “postmodernist train” to the end or else there would be no logical space for one’s own judgments and beliefs. Wittgenstein makes a similar claim when he states: “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not true, nor yet false.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, in focusing on the truthfulness or falsity of something, we rely upon judgments and beliefs which we can not at the same time call into question. Casting our light on a particular problem and its truth or falsity means we are not casting our light on the one who is holding the light, namely ourselves. Since we necessarily rely in our judging and believing on what is “out of view,” there is a “ground” which is inaccessible and upon which we necessarily rely. Such “necessary reliance upon” (which Polanyi calls tacit knowing) is an inevitable and an unimpeachable aspect of all human knowing.

To accept this human form of knowing, then, is to acknowledge that there are bounds within which we live that are not necessarily oppressive. A truly embodied and thus human form of knowing acknowledges this acritical given dimension at the heart of all forms of knowing. This givenness is prevented from being completely socially and culturally determined, however, for this would be to lapse once again into an impersonal and mechanistic view of the knower. Rather Polanyi’s conception of personal knowledge means not only that knowing is rooted in a given place or location,<sup>25</sup> socially and culturally shaped, but also that our acts of knowing are moral activities. This is by no means to deny that knowledge is used in immoral ways, but rather to point to the fact that in our acts of knowing we are acting as moral agents. Why is this? According to Polanyi, a knower’s acts “are personal judgments exercised responsibly with a view to a reality with which he is seeking to establish contact.” Any conclusion “represents a commitment of the person who arrives at it.”<sup>26</sup> Such an understanding of knowing, grounded in commitment with universal reach, radically undermines not only the often criticized picture of the purely objective neutral knower, but also the picture of the knower as completely socially determined or purely arbitrary. In other words, there would be no room for personal responsibility if knowing were entirely socially determined or the subjective assertion of power. More especially, the conception of calling would make no sense; as Polanyi states, our particular human place provides opportunities for “momentous acts of responsible commitment, made by accepting [our] own starting-point in space and time, as the condition of [our] own calling.”<sup>27</sup>

Our knowing, then, is “social” and “cultural”; this does not make knowing arbitrary or oppressive, but human. Our personal participation, both tacit and explicit, is the condition of the possibility of any knowing whatsoever, even the condition for using the word “coercion” and knowing what it means. If one believes every claim to truth is oppressive, then the graduate student is right: one must be silent. But then his own claim could not be made and language itself would unravel. If this occurred, there would be no true words or deeds for which we are responsible, and we would entirely eliminate personal presence. Such a claim is then ultimately impersonal.

## An Alternative Form of Theological Knowing

Before considering an alternative, I want to note briefly that Walter Ong, among others, writes about how the modern drive toward objectivism (and its flip side subjectivism) is itself shaped by the written word. While the subject of literacy and its influence on epistemology are beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to say that the concept of objectivism is parasitic upon a visual paradigm,<sup>28</sup> (which has been culturally absorbed) especially as this is formed by writing.<sup>29</sup> Ong notes that Kant’s split between the noumenal and phenomenal is primarily informed by our visual sensibilities, themselves shaped by writing. Focused on the word as seen, on static sight alone, understanding is condemned to deal only with surfaces which have a “beyond” (a thing-

in-itself) that it can never attain. “As soon as one sets up the problem of intellectual knowing in terms of a visualist construct such as ‘phenomena,’ the question of ‘noumena’ thus automatically arises.”<sup>30</sup> The Kantian problem that our language cannot directly get at the “thing-in-itself” arises primarily from within a visual paradigm. The written word leads us to imagine knowing is external and located primarily outside of us; we stand to our knowing as the eye to the written word, as a subject to a seemingly static object. As noted in the previous section, this framework has shaped and continues to shape theology. H. Richard Niebuhr notes problems with a visual paradigm when he states that “the images of the observational method are so out of place in the life of participation that they must be abandoned - or surreptitiously modified when employed by moral agents”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, an alternative form of theological knowing accounts for the fact that the knower in the process of knowing shapes the known. A genuine alternative form acknowledges that our beliefs, memory, imagination, and commitments — even though these might not be explicitly acknowledged, and may in fact be actively denied — nonetheless participate in shaping the content of what we know. Such an alternative is not objectivistic nor impersonal for it acknowledges that we are concretely rooted in a particular place rather than some impersonal universal. Yet neither is such a way of knowing merely that of an isolated subject. Believing, judging and knowing are acts of “embodied knowers knotted into the worldly appearance of others.”<sup>32</sup>

A number of theologians have described this bondedness in various ways. Charles McCoy, for example, uses the language of covenant to capture the embodied and social nature of our knowing. By covenant, McCoy means that “humans are born into covenants already made and are called to commit themselves to the heritage of their parents’ community. Emergence into selfhood is a process of affirming or rejecting the loyalties by which a person will live.”<sup>33</sup> McCoy uses the language of covenant to grasp the necessarily committal and social nature of human knowing and action: “It is the covenants of human living, whether recognized or not, that give shape to human communities and action.”<sup>34</sup> This communal aspect of knowing and judging is captured as well by the language of trust. H. Richard Niebuhr observes that trust is a fundamental aspect of all knowing: “there is a close connection between much of our ‘holding for true’ and our trusting+ believing and knowing, being certain and uncertain, trusting and having vision of true relations, these are events that occur only in interpersonal society.”<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Lash as well notes the centrality of trust in all our knowing activity: “Whether in physics or in politics, in psychology or prayer, to grow in knowledge is to grow through trust: trust given, trust betrayed, trust risked, misplaced, sustained, received and suffered.”<sup>36</sup> “Covenant,” “trust,” our “knottedness” in the “worldly appearance of others” — in each case such language points, contra objectivism, to our personal participation and, contra subjectivism, to the social and fiduciary nature of knowing.

In this light, I want to consider the liturgy as an alternative form of theological knowing. For the liturgy as a form of knowing mediates a concrete and convivial place, which itself shapes the content of what one is seeking to know. In light of my thesis, it is important to reiterate that all ways of knowing mediate some place, even though this place may go unacknowledged. The liturgy, however, is an acknowledged public activity and place. Like a drama,<sup>37</sup> the liturgy is “an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals - a whole greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>38</sup> Etymologically “liturgy” means a deed or action (ergon) performed by the people (laitos). The liturgy by definition relies upon action and speech as a mode of being together, yet the language relied upon is not only that of a written text. Moral philosopher, Charles Taylor, notes that “a sense of the good finds expression not only in linguistic descriptions but also in other speech acts+ [in] liturgy, we see that expression goes beyond the bounds of language as normally and narrowly conceived. The gesture of ritual, its music, its display of visual symbols, all enact in their own fashion our relation to God.”<sup>39</sup> The liturgy offers a theological way of knowing that, like all knowing, occurs in “covenant” with others, and relies upon personal participation, though this participation

calls forth a different kind of indwelling than, say, silently reading a book.

Alexander Schmemmann, an Orthodox liturgical theologian who was dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary for 25 years, grasps the import of the liturgy as an alternative form of knowing when he acknowledges that its function is not simply to "communicate ideas about God." Rather, Schmemmann describes the Orthodox Divine Liturgy as a journey of moving and remembering — gathering in a central place; singing the hymns; approaching the feast-prepared table; partaking of the bread and wine. In this liturgical journey, the Orthodox icons are not mere ecclesial decorations but are essential ways of rooting the participants in the Orthodox tradition of worship. "To be sure," says Schmemmann,

liturgy has a didactic or educational function, one can even say that in a sense the whole of worship is teaching, is theology, is preaching, yet this teaching not only is not separated and distinguished from "beauty," but "beauty" is its very content and means of communication... Two-thirds of all liturgical texts in our tradition are hymns - i.e., poetry meant to be sung. And poetry is by definition untranslatable for its meaning lies in the organic blend of the order, the rhythm and the music of words.<sup>40</sup>

For Schmemmann, the liturgical form shapes the content, and actualizes theological knowing that cannot be fully grasped outside the liturgical context. It makes no sense to attempt to separate the hymns — poetry meant to be sung — from their content, for the meaning rests in "the rhythm and the music of the words the organic blend of order." In fact, to separate form and content would be to change the form, and thus the content. To go one step further, there is no content apart from personal participation and for Schmemmann a particular kind of participation is necessary if one is to begin to understand the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Although theologian James Cone comes from a tradition distinctly different from Orthodoxy, he nonetheless makes statements which are similar to Schmemmann's. In the black Church tradition, Cone describes how black theology and black worship are integrally related. In the worship of the black community, Cone writes,

God's word is a happening. . . Truth is disclosed in the movement of the language and the passion created when the song is sung in the right pitch and tonal quality. Truth is found in shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move the people closer to the source of their being.<sup>41</sup>

For all the differences between Cone and Schmemmann, they both acknowledge that "knowing about God" takes place in worship: standing, sitting, kneeling, singing the rhythmic and harmonious hymns, listening to the preaching and to the silent spaces between themselves and God when they gather. Both Schmemmann and Cone claim that in order to grasp the content of their respective traditions, one must be involved in a liturgical form of knowing. In other words, they both make the claim that knowing does not take place abstractly or from a posture of suspicion, but rather knowing "is internally related to doing, to knowing how to 'go on' and doing so."<sup>42</sup> Their claims are a theological analogy of the often cited poem, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?" I cite this quotation to point out that, like a dance, the known content of the liturgy is embedded in the activity itself, as is the case in all knowing. A cohesion exists between the knower and the known such that to sunder one from the other is to change the form of knowing and thus the content.

Wendell Berry, in his article "Standing By Words,"<sup>43</sup> recognizes this cohesion that exists between the knower and the known, though he relates this to agriculture instead of theology. Berry describes two agricultural

“experts” who claim that American agriculture has become transformed “from an art form into a science,” from practical trade to an “objective” theory. According to the experts, the art of agriculture is concerned only with the “how of farming” while science is interested in the “whys.” Yet in their description of industrialization, the experts fail to see that their approach is equally rooted in a “how” of farming; their “how” is industrialization rather than traditional dairy farm life. The affect of this shift in their form or “how” of knowing in turn shapes the content. Rather than a “family companion animal,” the cow becomes a “manufacturing unit of the twentieth century.” As Berry points out, the experts’ more abstract and impersonal form of knowing drastically changes their understanding of the agricultural way of life.

This description of agriculture is analogous to theology in that theologians, constantly tempted to intellectual abstraction, ignore that theology, like any discipline, is not so much a “hard” science as it is an artful skill. Theology as artful skill points again to the fact that how and what we know are internally related. This precedes the subject/object split because before we explicitly identify what the object is, it has already been shaped by our dependence on how we are rooted in the world. The cow as “family companion” or “manufacturing unit” is parasitic on the form of knowing, the place from which one is oriented.

By describing an alternative form of knowing, I am seeking to broaden our theological imagination for how in fact we come to know. On what criteria do we necessarily rely when we evaluate, judge and know? What intellectual and moral sources do we place ourselves in the midst of? Thus far, I am simply suggesting that the evaluative criteria for theology also need to be drawn from liturgical activity itself.

This precludes the often held assumption that theology or religious studies is only a reflective enterprise best done from a critical or detached perspective (or even that it can be done from an entirely detached perspective).<sup>44</sup> Following Polanyi, I am attempting to integrate a post-critical approach into theology. Thus, along with Polanyi, I am challenging the clear-cut distinction between reflection or reflective knowing (understood as what we do at the Polanyi Society meetings, for example) and “practice” (usually associated with a liturgy, or a ballgame). In pointing to an alternative form of knowing, I wish to claim that every way we inhabit the world — whether at a ballgame, an academic meeting, or a Baptist service — is an activity through which we know: a committed place we reside in which we actively rely upon ourselves extended into that environment and shaped by that place in order to know. When I am pointing to the liturgy as an alternative place, I am not pointing to “activity” or “practice,” in contrast to reflection, but to another activity, another practice in addition to the activity of sitting in front of a computer or writing a paper.

For a concrete example of how theology historically has overlooked its own knowing sources, I turn to the well-known sixteenth century eucharistic debate at Marburg concerning the reality or symbolism of the elements. On one side of this debate, Reformation theologian Ulrich Zwingli claimed that the bread and wine were only symbolic; if not, Christ would have to suffer pain again and again by the teeth of the communicants. After all, stated Zwingli, when Jesus claims “I am the vine!” we don’t really imagine him to be a “literal,” physical vine. In his theological reflection, Zwingli relied upon criteria to define the “real” which could be verified by any outside observer.

In contrast to Zwingli’s claim that the eucharist is only symbolic or figurative, Martin Luther, remaining closer to the Catholic tradition, held to the literal meaning of “is” in the statement “This is my body.” Luther believed that the church suffered a loss when the bread and wine were regarded as mere signs. While Luther and Zwingli were on opposite sides of the debate, they nonetheless both argued out of the same imaginative framework, one that placed the literal over against the figurative, the real over against the symbol. Luther remained more the “man of the Middle Ages”; even so, notes Erich Heller, “the Enlightenment thought of the Italian Renaissance,” overshadowed this sixteenth century debate, in which increasingly rationalism’s

objective and lucid criteria determined the real.<sup>45</sup>

At the brink of the Enlightenment, we see reflected in the Luther/Zwingli debate a growing attachment to real knowledge as that which is objective, verifiable by physical measurement and not symbolic. These early reformers' imaginations increasingly were held captive by an understanding of the real that they imagined any detached observer could have. Their own place, participants in the Eucharist, was not regarded as a significant fact in their theological reflections. By attempting to argue from the standpoint of anyone (skeptical Zwingli moreso), and by failing fully to acknowledge their own liturgical place, their theological perceptions participated in a loss (especially for Protestants) that eventually stripped the Eucharist of the very thing that made it significant in the first place: the real presence of an ever-faithful God. Following this dispute, an age would slowly emerge "in which not only the sacraments but the holiness of all that is holy will cease to be 'literally true' body will become merely body and symbol merely symbol."<sup>46</sup>

How would a post-critical perspective be different? First of all, if we release ourselves from the belief that the real is only that which we have from a critical perspective, and instead acknowledge that all knowing is rooted in a particular place, then we are able to define "real" in radically different terms. The real is that to which we responsibly commit ourselves, and that which opens up new realms of reality. As both Cone and Schmemmann declare, the liturgy, when faithfully entered into, has the potential to open up heretofore unknown dimensions of God's presence and activity in the world. Certainly, then, the Eucharist is real, but not in the critical terms used by either Zwingli or Luther.

In considering the liturgy as an alternative form of theological knowing, I am arguing that all forms of knowing are human activities, and thus that the liturgy is one knowing activity among others. I am also arguing, in light of Polanyi, that all knowing involves personal judgment, commitment and responsibility. To ignore this fact may be harmless; however, it may also significantly distort our perception of ourselves as knowers and persons. At best, it may cause us, as Stanley Cavell has said, to be chafed by our own skin: at worst, it may lead to an unrecognized denial of our humanity.

In contrast to the above, the acknowledgement that all forms of knowing are human activities enables us to expand our imagination of how in fact we come to know. Such imaginative stretching is needed in the discipline of theology, as well as other disciplines, where we easily forget what St. Augustine reminded us of and what Polanyi holds is true of all knowing: "unless you believe, you shall not understand."<sup>47</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Polanyi analyzes works of art in his "theory of the integration of incompatibles." The capacity of representational art to fuse intrinsic "incompatible features+into radically novel qualities" lends art its depth. In drama, for example, the incompatible features are 1) simulation of a story line and 2) the apparatus of stagecraft. The "artificial framework+ contradicts its representational aspect," but these subsidiary features provide a novel joint meaning which make "us live in it as its maker first lived in it+" See "What is a Painting?" in *British*

*Journal of Aesthetics*, 10 (July 1970), pp. 230-232.

2. Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, Marjorie Grene, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), p. 136.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

4. Karl Jaspers, *Kant*, Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), p. 15.

5. H.J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), p. 26.

6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), p. 105e.

7. Horace Freeland Judson, *The Search for Solutions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p. 6.

8. Though this is Ricoeur's phrase, he should not be blamed for all the ways the term has been misused.

9. Examples of this approach are commonplace. Mary Hunt, of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), for example, claims with satisfaction that "The myth of objectivity has been put to rest in science as well as theology." This settled, the primary task of theology (feminist/womanist/mujerista theology) becomes "a critique of power through a hermeneutics of suspicion" in Paul Mankowski, "What I Saw at the American Academy of Religion," *First Things*, no. 21 (March 1992), p. 41.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

11. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 158.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

15. Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 200.

16. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962), p. 233.

17. The whole tone of the graduate student's letter is intensively moral, as for example in the ending: "MacIntyre and Fish and so many others can stop where they do because they don't mind the killing but you can't stop there, and I would like to think that I can't either," *After Christendom?*, p. 161.

18. Polanyi refers to this phenomena as a dynamo-objective coupling. Scientific assertions are accepted

(objective) because they satisfy moral passions (dynamo). Such dynamo-objective coupling offers a tight defense of its position: “Any criticism of its scientific part is rebutted by the moral passions behind it, while any moral objections to it are coldly brushed aside by invoking the inexorable verdict of its scientific findings,” in Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 230.

19. Ibid., p. 228.

20. Ibid., p. 294.

21. Ibid., p. 295.

22. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), p. 97.

23. Thomas A. Langford and William H. Poteat, eds., *Intellect and Hope, Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 10.

24. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 28e.

25. Charles McCoy, a contemporary theologian and ethicist who has incorporated Polanyi’s thought, uses the term “location” to describe all knowing as human. “To speak with understanding of where we are requires recognition that our location is not in empty space defined by geometrical coordinates or geographical nomenclature. Humans live in community, in relationship, in time and history,” in *When Gods Change, Hope for Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p. 86.

26. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983), p. 77, emphasis mine

27. *Personal Knowledge*, p. 323.

28. Hans Jonas, in his article “The Nobility of Sight,” links epistemological objectivity to sight: “Only the simultaneity of image allows the beholder to compare and interrelate: it not only offers many things at once, but offers them in their mutual proportion, and thus objectivity emerges preeminently from sight.” This contrasts radically with hearing where the sound discloses “not an object but a dynamical event,” in *The Phenomenon of Life, Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), p. 144, p. 137

29. See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963), Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven: Yale University, 1986), and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

30. Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word, Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), p. 74.

31. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 70. Here it is also important to note that our modern seeing is itself a learned skill. For a discussion of this, see *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 96-99.

32. Rob Baird, "How Not to Read Polanyian Meditations," Paper delivered at AAR Southeast Regional Meeting, Atlanta, GA, 1988.
33. Charles McCoy, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
35. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth, An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 33.
36. Nicholas Lash, "Contemplation, Metaphor, and Real Knowledge," Paper delivered at "Knowing God, Christ and Nature in the Post-Positivistic Era" Symposium, University of Notre Dame, April 14-17, 1993, p. 4.
37. Taylor Scott rightly notes the difference between liturgy and the theatre. "There is a seriousness — a direct seriousness — in liturgical action which is not in theatre. There appears to be, even in the most 'realistic' of theatre, the absolute necessity of maintaining aesthetic distance. In liturgy, however, there is an enactment of the Church's presence before God (and vice versa) which is for real," in "The Likelihood of Liturgy: Reflections Upon Prayer Book Revision and Its Liturgical Implications," *Anglican Theological Review*, 62, No. 2 (April, 1980), pp. 104-105.
38. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (NY: National Student Christian Federation, 1963), p. 13.
39. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University), pp. 91-92.
40. Alexander Schmemmann, "Problems of Orthodoxy in America: The Liturgical Problem," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 8 (Winter, 1964), pp. 167.
41. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 22.
42. Rowan Williams, "Review of Theology After Wittgenstein," *Philosophical Investigations* 10 (October, 1987), p. 344.
43. Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: Northpoint, 1983), pp. 42-47.
44. For an example of this assumption, see *A Report to the Profession. Liberal Learning and the Religion Major* (Syracuse, NY: American Academy of Religion, 1990), p. 13, which states that "securing conviction is not an objective of the academic study of religion—Conviction may actually interfere." What the authors of the report fail to realize is that their own convictions are already operative in the very writing of the report. There is no conviction-neutral place to stand to study religion.
45. Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1971), p. 266.

46. Ibid.

47. as quoted, Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, p. 61.

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Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology  
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The aim of this book is to give a reconstruction of the main elements in Polanyi's postmodern and naturalized epistemology. Chapters 1-4 are concerned with the characteristics of 'tacit knowing', and Polanyi's use of concepts like 'assertion', 'belief', 'truth' and 'reality'. Drawing on J.R. Searle's recent theory of intentionality, the 'tacit' component of assertive utterances is analysed in terms of intentional states. It is argued that Polanyi does not use a subjective notion of truth, and that his partial analysis of 'true' can be regarded as a special version of the non-descriptive theory of truth. His metaphysical realism is discussed, and his approach in the philosophy of science and that of Lakatos are compared. In the chapters 5-6, the Popperian critique that the theory of personal knowledge is subjectivist and psychologist, is deconstructed. It is argued that Polanyi leaves the objectivity of knowledge intact, and that his epistemology is preferable to the Popperian conception of knowledge 'without a knowing subject'. In chapter 7 the later extension of the theory of tacit knowing into the realm of the humanities, especially that of religion, is touched upon and some suggestions are offered for its relevance in the field of philosophy of religion.