
REVIEWS

Reeves, Marjorie (ed.). *Christian Thinking and Social Order: Conviction Politics from the 1930s to the Present Day* (370 Lexington Avenue: New York: Cassell, 1999), 224 pages. USD\$27.95. ISBN: 0-34-70248-X.

Polanyi, when writing to Mannheim on their experiences in the Moot, acknowledges, “These things...[i.e., Moot discussions] changed our lives” (42). In itself, this is a remarkable statement, since before Mannheim’s death in January of 1947, Polanyi attended only four Moot meetings. It is hard to square this minimal contact with its evident impact on Polanyi’s thought. Yet, that it had such an impact is well documented. *Christian Thinking and Social Order: Conviction Politics from the 1930s to the Present Day* (CTSO) provides the astute reader with an insight as to why Polanyi initially would have joined such a group, and helps outline the atmosphere which shaped much of his thinking.

At a basic level, CTSO provides missing historical information and clarifies some questions raised by both Gabor’s (Eva Gabor, “Michael Polanyi in the Moot”. *Polanyiana* 1-2(2), 1992, 120-126), and Mullins’ (Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi and J.H. Oldham: In Praise of Friendship”, *Appraisal* 1(4), October 1997, 179-190) articles that treat the importance of the Moot for Polanyi. For example, Mullins, in his article on the relationship between Oldham and Polanyi, states, “...there is no mention of an explicit objective for the Moot....” The article in CTSO by William Taylor shows the origins of the Moot were found in Oldham’s proposal to form a Christian “Order,” an elite group which would help form a new cultural Christendom. This “Order” never developed, but an understanding of Oldham’s original proposal helps explain Mannheim’s influence over the Moot’s thinking—more so than any

other individual.

CTSO, with its easy style, assumes little acquaintance with the period, and its major figures. In its larger aspect, CTSO is an exercise in “historical retrieval” (ix) that treats the projects of Joseph Oldham and his British circle and their efforts to get Christian churches to address “pressing issues of culture, society and politics” (ix) in the middle (and, secondarily, the later) decades of the century. Much of the book is in an introductory style with snippets and outlines of debates, rather than carrying a sustained argument. Due to this orientation, it lacks the particular definition, which might be of interest to those reading to learn many details about Polanyi’s background. The precise tributaries to Polanyi’s thought are impossible to trace.

CTSO clearly sketches the atmosphere of the times and the unique response of the Moot and its related organizations. It illuminates the Moot’s nature as an “informal discussion,” and shows the importance of such discussion in the development of thinking in a variety of figures and projects. While the Moot’s discussion probably stimulated and helped jell some of Polanyi’s ideas, the CTSO account does not catalogue or plot Moot discussions. At best, readers can understand Polanyi’s context and speculate about where cross-pollination occurred. Although CTSO does provide a concise picture of the times unavailable in any other single published work, (with the possible exception being R. Kojecky’s very good *T.S. Eliot’s Social Thought*, Faber, 1971), the book ultimately leaves the reader feeling unsatisfied.

One important shortcoming of the book is its heavy emphasis on education. This no doubt reflects the life-long emphasis of Reeves herself. Nevertheless, it is frustrating and gives the

book an unbalanced feel. Even the article on the Moot is an abridged version of an essay titled “The Moot and Education,” first published in 1996. The overbearing emphasis upon education, rather than illuminating the developing issues, became something, this reader at least, had to wade through.

Recently, some discussions in *Appraisal* (see Vol. 1, numbers 2, 3 and 4) have hinted at an acquaintance between Polanyi and the philosopher John Macmurry. Macmurry’s concern to be “a thinker and a doer” provided strong stimulus to the Moot and such a base assumption would have resonated strongly with Polanyi. In this context, questions come up about two other writers and their important books: M. Buber’s *I-Thou*, and Jaques Maritain’s *Integral Humanism*. Both books were extremely influential, even to the extent that the Moot arranged a special dinner occasion with Maritain. It is impossible in such an environment to imagine Polanyi did not have at least a passing acquaintance with these works. And if it is true that epistemology models ontology, perhaps a study of the ontological models around Polanyi would prove fruitful. Such questions deserve fuller consideration and this book provides a convenient entrance point.

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Michael Polanyi. *Society, Economics and Philosophy—Selected Papers*. Ed. R. T. Allen. New Brunswick, NJ.: Transaction Publishers. 1997. USD \$49.95. ISBN 1-56000-278-6.

This new collection of Polanyi articles, put together by R. T. Allen, is a set of essays that range chronologically from Polanyi’s first non-scientific publication (1917) to publications near the end of his life (1972). Allen suggests that he avoided pieces that were incorporated in major Polanyi books from the *Logic of Liberty* onward, as well as articles that seemed very closely to resemble other articles or seemed to add little to things written elsewhere (1). What his principle of selection leaves him with is twenty-five essays that suggest the range of (non-scientific) topics that Polanyi reflected on in his long life. Some of the essays (e.g., “Genius in Science” published in 1972 in *Boston Studies in Philosophy of Science*) may be familiar to those who have explored a bit beyond the major Polanyi books. But many of the essays are selections that fall outside of philosophy of science, treating topics in economics, politics, religion and aesthetics. These essays, Allen groups into three categories, “Political Questions,” “Economic and Social Theory” “Mind, Religion and Art,” (in addition to his fourth category, “The Theory and Practice of Science”); I will focus my comments here chiefly upon material in the first two categories, since that is less familiar.

First a note about Allen’s two appendices and his Introduction, since these sections could be helpful to scholars: in addition to a brief comment on Polanyi’s life, work and place in the history of thought, in his Introduction Allen helpfully discusses his motives and principles used in pulling together this collection. Appendix I is a previously compiled and privately published annotated bibliography of Polanyi’s writings. With many entries, Allen provides notes that identify places, other than the original place, where essays or parts of essays have been published. Appendix II provides summaries of articles that were not included in Polanyi’s major books or in this collection. If the themes are common ones

treated in books and other articles, these summaries are very brief. Other summaries are more extensive. Allen suggests that he wanted to provide in one place “something of the whole body of Polanyi’s non-scientific publications, except for two of which I have not been able to trace any copies” (2). This set of summaries should help guide those interested in selecting other essays for study.

The opening unit of Allen’s collection, titled “Political Questions,” includes eight selections drawn from essays written as early as 1917 and as late as 1970. Two very early pieces were originally in Hungarian and were translated for this first English publication by Endre J. Nagy. “To the Peacemakers: Views on the Prerequisites of War and Peace in Europe” was a pamphlet republished in the *Huszadik Szazad* (the journal *Twentieth Century*) in 1917. It is an essay strongly critical of nationalism that shows Polanyi’s skepticism about the possibilities of a lasting peace in Europe. Some of Polanyi’s constructive suggestions for Europe sound strangely like ideas in the contemporary American press about the EU. The second short early essay was originally published (in 1919) in the journal of the Galileo Circle (*Szabadgondolat*) edited by Karl Polanyi. This essay suggests that materialistic accounts of politics in terms of competing interests are misguided. Polanyi recommends skepticism toward politics as presently constituted in favor of a more analytical approach:

Our job is exploring the truth; dissecting the confused images of politics and analysing the belief in political concepts; finding the originating conditions of political illusions and what animates the imagination to fix illusions to certain objects (31).

“Jewish Problems,” a 1943 essay based on a 1942 speech to a British Jewish group, reflects Polanyi’s skepticism about Zionism. Polanyi is clearly sympathetic with the plight of poor Jews. He sees himself as a part of Judaism. But he is also quite critical of what he regards as Judaism’s backwardness. He

thinks the ghettos prevented Jews from joining the projects of modernity, except for rare figures and the assimilators. He thinks assimilation is a sensible course and that this should proceed—and would have without incident—if Nazi policies had not emerged. “The Struggle Between Truth and Propaganda” is a critical review of a rosy portrayal of Stalin’s Soviet Union by the Webbs. “Rights and Duties of Science” is a sharply critical review of a book by J. D. Bernal advocating social planning for science (the review is also part of Polanyi’s 1940 book *The Contempt of Freedom*). “History and Hope: An Analysis of Our Age” is a 1962 article that develops Polanyi’s “moral inversion” argument used in many articles and books. The final two essays complement “History and Hope”: “A Postscript” (1963) extends the discussion of “moral inversion.” “Why Did We Destroy Europe” (1970) treats Polanyi’s panoramic reading of history and the transformation of values in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The six articles in Allen’s second section “Economic and Social Theory” somewhat overlap themes treated in the first eight essays insofar as some of Polanyi’s ideas about political freedom and history are intimately linked to his ideas about economics. In Allen’s account, Polanyi’s economic thought has been somewhat neglected; he hopes that putting these six essays into circulation will rectify this. “Collectivist Planning,” which was also included in *The Contempt of Freedom*, is an interesting theoretical discussion of the fit of organizational strategies and tasks; it is, of course, also a critique of central planning in science, the economic sphere, and particularly in the Soviet Union. This is an especially interesting discussion since it clarifies the middle ground which Polanyi seems to take in his economic and political thought: he is certainly critical of collectivist experiments but is sometimes equally insightful in his criticisms of absolute laissez faire approaches:

Public protection should, as a rule, be given to such individual actions in which there is a real public interest to preserve; and naturally

not in disregard of the action's social consequences, but precisely because of them. Disregard of social consequences is equivalent to anarchy, which may amount to barbarism. The protection given to barbarous anarchy in the illusion of vindicating freedom, as demanded by the doctrine of laissez faire, has been most effective in bringing contempt on the name of freedom; it sought to deprive it of all public conscience, and thereby supported the claim of Collectivism to be the sole guardian of social interests (139).

"Profits and Private Enterprise" (1948) is another essay which analyzes problems of centrally planned endeavors. Here Polanyi discusses "the polycentric problem" (153) which he argues centrally planned economies cannot solve. He returns to the "principles of polycentricity" in "The Determinants of Social Action," an essay included in a 1969 festschrift for F. A. von Hayek. Polanyi holds that

... the allocation of a multitude of resources to a large number of productive centres for the purpose of producing and distribution a great variety of commodities can be carried out in an orderly manner only by a system of mutual adjustments. This is to say that the task of modern technology is of a polycentric character and that polycentric tasks can be solved only by mutual adjustment (185-185).

Polanyi enlarges upon this thesis by discussing the nature and limitations of institutions through which polycentric tasks are implemented.

"The Foolishness of History" (1953) was originally an *Encounter* article that contends that there is no economic rationality in Lenin's economic concepts, although many writers have been duped by them. Polanyi praises von Mises' insights about Soviet theory, but also points out that von Mises did not properly foresee ways "that a system of nationalised enterprises could be run on commercial lines" (162).

At the beginning of the Cold War, Polanyi seemed to foresee where history was headed, although he hoped that rational argument could redirect history:

We are faced with the force of moral passions, armed with weapons of mass destruction, but this fearful combination hinges simply on a false conception of administrative possibilities; and this very point may therefore be susceptible to persuasion by argument (163).

"Towards a Theory of Conspicuous Production" (1960) is a more detailed analysis of the Soviet attempt to replace "the market by central direction" (169). Polanyi claims that the Soviet system is not truly "directed centrally" (181). He argues central direction cannot replace a "process of mutual adjustment" (169). In "On Liberalism and Liberty" (1955), Polanyi suggests that the Soviet Union has a rigged market economy, one manipulated by government intervention. In this article, Polanyi helpfully distinguishes centralized economic systems and totalitarian systems (found in both the Soviet Union and Germany). Polanyi discusses free institutions and traditional practices of freedom that he thinks are the foundation of healthy political liberalism. He criticizes both right and the left wing politics as it was manifest in the mid fifties: "Too many people are still glaring at each other through the angry masks of obsolete ideologies" (208).

The six articles in Allen's third section, "The Theory and Practice of Science" cover ground that readers who have studied *Personal Knowledge* will find familiar. Although I shall comment on only three articles, they are, nevertheless, an interesting group, "Science: Observation and Belief" (1947) summarizes Polanyi's argument thus:

Cogito ergo credo—I think, therefore I believe. Let us accept this fact and believe with open eyes. We have then a chance to hold our beliefs in mature consideration of alternative beliefs, and not merely to succumb to some uncontrolled residue of belief (232).

“Science and Reality” (1967) is an essay which those who desire to explore more carefully aspects of Polanyi’s realism will find fascinating. “Creative Imagination” (1966) explores the way in which imagination and intuition work together in the logic of scientific discovery. Other essays in the third section are “Genius in Science” (1972), “Life Transcending Physics and Chemistry (1967), and the brief companion essay “Do Life Processes Transcend Physics and Chemistry?” (1968).

The five articles in Allen’s fourth section, “Mind, Religion and Art,” are pieces that represent Polanyi’s effort to apply his theory of tacit knowing to questions about machine intelligence, mind-body problems, religion and art. “The Hypothesis of Cybernetics” (1951) argues a formalized deductive system is not equivalent to a human mind. “The Body-Mind Relation” (1968) is a complex article that argues against reducing mind to the body and sets forth Polanyi’s hierarchical view of the human being. “The Scientific Revolution” (1964) is another complex essay that comments on a number of matters: the hierarchical universe; Greek, medieval and modern rationalism; skills, perception and knowledge; and the scientific and Christian conceptions of human beings. For those interested in making more sense of some of Polanyi’s notions about religion—particularly Christianity—this is a fascinating essay. There are comments here about Buber and Tillich (thinkers Polanyi was at least somewhat acquainted with) and the “Pauline scheme” (343). “Polanyi’s Logic—Answer” (1966) is a brief reply to a comment on his article titled “On the Modern Mind.” Polanyi unpacks his claim that explanations of human actions that don’t consider whether actions are good or bad are explanations that “deny that moral motives enter in our actions” (345). “What is a Painting?” was a 1970 essay in which Polanyi extends the theory of tacit knowing to discuss the “transnatural” (353) integrations involved in appreciation of works of representational art. This is one of the essays that underlie the final Polanyi and Prosch book, *Meaning*.

All in all, this is an interesting collection of Polanyi essays. Scholars certainly will find this a useful book. Those who teach Polanyi material will find this a convenient source which offers alternatives or supplements essays in *Knowing and Being* or major Polanyi texts.

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Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to “owner-polanyi@sbu.edu” to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 E-MAIL: apczynski@sbu.edu PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.

Polanyi Society Membership

Tradition and Discovery is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally three issues of *TAD* each year.

Annual membership in the Polanyi Society is \$20 (\$10 for students). The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Humanities, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (fax: 816-271-5987, e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu) Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the card holder's name as it appears on the card, the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be sent to Mullins. New members should provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), e-mail address and/or fax number. Institutional members should identify a department to contact for

WWW Polanyi Resources

The Polanyi Society has a World Wide Web site at <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. In addition to information about Polanyi Society membership and meetings, the site contains the following: (1) the history of Polanyi Society publications, including a listing of issues by date and volume with a table of contents for recent issues of *Tradition and Discovery*; (2) a comprehensive listing of *Tradition and Discovery* authors, reviews and reviewers; (3) information on locating early publications; (4) information on *Appraisal* and *Polanyiana*, two sister journals with special interest in Polanyi's thought; (5) the "Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi" which provides an orientation to archival material housed in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library; (6) photographs of Michael Polanyi.