

The Role Of Tacit Knowledge In Religion

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ABSTRACT: Key Words: practical knowledge, tacit knowledge, religious tacit knowledge
This essay explores the notion of practical religious knowledge in three steps. I examine a short passage in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (A 132-3 / B 171-2) on judgment, a passage that points out that we (necessarily) know more than we can say or state. I then introduce Michael Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge to suggest what "religious tacit knowledge" is. Finally, I analyze a text from Master Eckhart's Counsels on Discernment (Reden der Unterweisung) to show the relevance of this notion of practical (or tacit) knowledge in religious contexts.

Introduction

Clarity concerning what kind of knowledge a religious person possesses is of the utmost importance. For one thing, J. Whittaker remarks that the believer must have some knowledge that enables him to make the distinction between literal and non-literal descriptions of God.¹ In the believer's perception, "God is a rock," but *not really* a rock. God however really *is* love. Whittaker suggests that the knowledge the making of this distinction requires cannot be of a metaphysical or experiential brand. According to him, a more basic form of knowledge is at work here which he terms "practical" knowledge.

Without going into his discussion of the metaphysical and experiential view, I would like to elaborate on the notion of practical religious knowledge in three steps. Firstly, I want to consider a short passage in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 132-3 / B 171-2) on judgment. This passage points out that we (necessarily) know more than we can say or state. Secondly, Michael Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge will be introduced to see what "religious tacit knowledge" could mean. Thirdly, analysis of a text from Master Eckhart's *Counsels on Discernment (Reden der Unterweisung)* will aim to show the relevance of this notion of practical (or tacit) knowledge in religious contexts.

1. Kant on Judgment in *Critique of Pure Reason*

With the expression "practical knowledge," no reduction of all forms of knowledge to the world of the tactile is intended. It does, however, commit us to the view that knowledge can never be purely notional. There is in the acquisition of knowledge an element which Gilbert Ryle has termed "knowing how." Calculating can be a merely mental operation (as in mental arithmetic), but that doesn't take away the fact that one has to know how to calculate. It is in this sense of "art" that the word "practical" has to be understood.

Western philosophy seems to be marked, from its early beginning, by a certain intellectualism. Intellectualism is the conviction that wants to install a strong distinction between knowledge and abilities, between theory and practice. The theoretical knowledge-act is characterised as a purely mental event, as a kind

of contemplation, while any form of practice or ability is seen as an application of previously acquired theoretical knowledge. The distinction values theory over practice because, in this view, practice depends on theory and not the other way round.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant dedicates a text to judgment entitled “Of the transcendental faculty of judgment in general” (*Von der Transzendentale Urteilkraft überhaupt* A 132-3 / B 171-2). The passage is to such a degree interesting that I quote extensively:

If understanding in general be defined as the faculty of laws or rules, the faculty of judgment may be termed the faculty of *subsumption* under these rules; that is, of distinguishing whether this or that does or does not stand under a given rule (*casus datae legis*). General logic contains no directions or precepts for the faculty of judgment, nor can it contain any such. For as *it makes abstraction of all content of cognition*, no duty is left for it, except that of exposing analytically the mere form of cognition in conceptions, judgments, and conclusions, and of thereby establishing formal rules for all exercise of the understanding. Now if this logic wished to give some general direction how we should subsume under these rules, that is, how we should distinguish whether this or that did or did not stand under them, this again could not be done otherwise than by means of a rule. But this rule, precisely because it is a rule, requires for itself direction from the faculty of judgment. Thus, it is evident that the understanding is capable of being instructed by rules, but that the judgment is a peculiar talent, which does not, and cannot require tuition, but only exercise.²

Kant says that the understanding offers the rules along which cognitive operations proceed, but the understanding doesn't tell us how and on what these rules have to be applied; that is the task of judgment. So judgment sees itself confronted with two kinds of data: on the one hand, the rules of the understanding, and, on the other hand, concrete facts. It then decides which facts fall under which rules. Now Kant conceives judgment as a peculiar talent (he also talks about mother wit) that one simply has to have, and that can be improved only by training on the basis of concrete examples. Kant had a very good reason for conceiving judgment as a talent. For, if judgment were a rule governed faculty, we would end up in an infinite regress. We would have rules for the application of rules, etcetera. That Kant calls the absence of the faculty of judgment in a person “stupidity” (*“Der Mangel an Urteilkraft ist eigentlich das, was man Dummheit nennt,...”*), and not “ignorance,” underlines the importance of this faculty. When it is completely missing, even training on the basis of examples is of no avail, because these examples too have to be judged. The acquisition of knowledge therefore depends according to Kant on the practical ability to apply rules. One must know how to be “reasonable.”

In this perspective, theory and practice can be said to be interdependent. However cerebral a scientific discipline may be, there is always the need for judgment, a need which can only be satisfied by training. It is moreover impossible to formulate the activity of judgment completely explicitly.

2. Michael Polanyi's Notion of Tacit Knowledge

The work of Michael Polanyi³ can be seen as an attempt to elucidate the mysterious workings of judgment.⁴ In *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi takes as a starting point the fact that we know more than we can tell. For example, we recognize the face of an acquaintance out of thousands, if not millions. But nobody can

tell how he or she does this. Another illustration comes from the importance that schools and universities attach to seminars and laboratory experiences. Students learn to identify and recognize the “physiognomy” of minerals, plants, animals, diseases, grammatical constructions, and, why not, philosophical problems. No lesson or course is ever completely and purely theoretical in the sense that in any educational event the student picks up more than what is said. In a lesson, more things happen than the stating of definitions, historical processes, or arguments. If that were not the case, then it would suffice to send a shipload of our finest books to developing countries in order to stimulate their scientific growth.

Polanyi wants to see any act of knowing as an active⁵ integration act by the knower. “Active” means here that epistemic activity involves, presupposes or demands a certain practical ability. The intellectual and the practical, the “*wissen*” and the “*können*,”⁶ the “knowing that” and the “knowing how” (cf. Ryle) are in his perception interwoven.

These two aspects of knowing have a similar structure and neither is ever present without the other. (...) I shall always speak of “knowing,” therefore, to cover both practical and theoretical knowledge.⁷

Polanyi refers to a psychological experiment that reveals the structure he wants to describe. R.S. Lazarus and R.A. McCleary⁸ presented a trial subject with a large number of nonsensical syllables. After some of these syllables, the trial subject got a small electric shock. After a while, the trial subject began to anticipate these shock-syllables bodily, but when he was asked to identify these syllables he wasn’t capable of singling them out. Clearly he possessed a form of knowledge which he couldn’t communicate.⁹ On the basis of this experiment, it is possible to give a sketch of the basic structure of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge always implies the presence of two terms (or elements). In the experiment, the shock syllables were the first term and the electric shocks were the second term. The trial subject had managed to link the first term with the second. How is it that the first term, and its connection with the second, remained tacit? This is due to the fact that the trial subject’s attention was entirely focused on the electric shock. His attention moved, so to speak, from the shock syllables to the electric shock. His knowledge of the first term was a function of his knowledge of the second term. Polanyi states it like this:

(...) in an act of tacit knowing we *attend from* something for attending *to* something else; namely *from* the first term *to* the second term of the tacit relation. In many ways the first term of this relation will prove to be nearer to us, the second further away from us.¹⁰

Because of the proximity of the first term and the distance to the second term, Polanyi also speaks of the “proximal” and the “distal” term. Because the attention for the first term is at the service of the orientation on the second term, he also calls them “subsidiary” and “focal.” We can therefore draw up the following scheme:

first term	□	second term
proximal	□	distal
subsidiary	□	focal
tacit	□	explicit
from	□	to

Another example is someone who tries to find his way in complete darkness for the first time with a stick. This person feels the impact of the stick in his palm and fingers and hasn't got the least idea what the stick is touching. Only after a lot of practice is this sensation in the palm of the hand transformed into a feeling for what the point of the exploring stick is touching. So, in the beginning of this learning process, our attention is focused on the sensations in our hand. At the end of this process our attention has shifted to the objects the stick touches. We feel, or see, if you like, the slippery rock, the furry dog, the threshold. etcetera. The sensations in our hand and precisely how they tell us something about the objects we meet, however, remain tacit. We decode, as it were, tacitly the sensations in our hand into three dimensional objects.

In this way, the stick becomes something from which our attention proceeds, and not something which attracts our attention. Polanyi call this process a process of incorporation. He writes: "we incorporate it in our body--or extend our body to include it--so that we come to dwell in it."¹¹ Someone who has true knowledge of something (as opposed to having it memorized), has interiorized the object of his knowledge. A physicist cannot suffice with memorizing physical theories. When we say that he has a thorough command or mastery of his subject matter, we mean precisely that his theories have become instruments to him.¹²

Our first attempt at describing tacit knowledge was rather negative: tacit is what we know but cannot tell. Now we are in a position to give a more positive account: tacit knowledge is interiorized knowledge.

What happens when one tries to make tacit knowledge explicit? When what is proximal is placed at a distance and scrutinized carefully, one witnesses the destruction of the meaning the proximal had.¹³ Think what happens when you repeat a word with great attention for the movements of lips and tongue, when a piano player focuses his attention on his fingers in the middle of a concerto, or when you, while writing, suddenly stop worrying about what to write and, instead, start looking at your moving pen. The word loses its meaning, the piano player has a black out and the writing turns into scribbling. But still, this is the way how instruction starts. We learn to pronounce difficult words by paying attention to movements of tongue and lips, to play the piano by paying attention to the positioning of our fingers and to write by thinking how to write and not what to write. Surely, portions of what is tacit, can and must be made explicit. There are manuals for fingering at the piano, for pronunciation, for writing. One could even write a book about how to drive a car. Only, the necessary interiorisation of this knowledge will not be achieved purely on the basis of this explicitation.¹⁴ The piano player will not play any better because he has read about fingering, but because he has practiced it. And nobody can drive a car because he has read a book. The same holds for mathematics, physics, philosophy, morality and religion.

The tacit component of our knowledge can never be made wholly explicit for two reasons. Firstly because even when an explicitation is possible, we still have to know how this explicit knowledge has to be applied. As noted above, the integration of knowledge cannot be achieved solely on the basis of the explicit.¹⁵ Secondly, because the activity of making tacit knowledge explicit too is based on tacit knowledge, one must know how to make things explicit.

Any epistemic activity consists, in Polanyi's view, of two parts: an articulate and an inarticulate part. The knowledge this inarticulate part offers is not open to criticism, but forms the ground from which we criticize.¹⁶ Trust plays a considerable role in science, according to Polanyi, just as it does in religion. This doesn't mean, of course, that any form of rational criticism is impertinent in Polanyi's view. But one can only criticize what is explicitly known at some point in time and not the at that very moment operative tacit

knowledge that makes explicit knowledge possible.¹⁷

This acritical tacit foundation of explicit knowledge is passed on, both in science and in religion, within a tradition. To pass on tacit knowledge requires in most cases the presence of a parent, a teacher, a tutor, a professor or a master. The teacher's demonstrative act consists in leading the attention of his pupil away along his pointing finger towards a distal term on which the pupil focuses his attention. In doing so, the pupil acquires at the same time tacitly the proximal principle that makes the pointing possible. So tradition does not mean in Polanyi's terminology a set of rigid dogmas or prescriptions. "Tradition" stands for the passing on of tacit knowledge. In this sense, tradition¹⁸ forms part of the conditions of knowledge: "An art which cannot be specified in detail cannot be transmitted by prescription, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice."¹⁹ This relation of master and apprentice indicates, again, that trust is an essential characteristic of epistemic activity:

You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself. These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another. A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition.(ibid.)

3. Analysis of a Text from Master Eckhart's *Counsels on Discernment*

Religious life contains in itself a fund of religious tacit knowledge.²⁰ Thanks to this religious know-how, the believer can give attention to God.

"The words of prayer and confession, the actions of the ritual, the lesson, the sermon, the church itself, are the clues of the worshipper striving towards God." (ibid.)

Without a practical understanding²¹ of how one has to go about with these elements, they lose their meaning.

"Divine service can mean nothing to a person completely lacking the skill of religious knowing."²²

In this perspective, religious knowledge is the result of a practice (in any case of knowing how to practice). It's all about "things which can be apprehended only in serving them."²³ The devout life is therefore in Polanyi's view the first source²⁴ of religious knowledge.

When the devout life consists in giving attention from the prayer, the ritual, the sermon to God, the purpose or goal of it is to come nearer to God. This coming nearer to God entails the inversion of the original from-to relation. In leaving the church, the believer wants to give attention to the world and the people that surround him from his nearness to God. The devout life implies an oscillation between giving attention to God and giving attention to something else from the source of divine nearness. This is, of course, the well-known

distinction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.

Now, if we want to investigate this tacit religious knowledge we could certainly turn to the religious life of the common man. The most telling examples however are to be found in the monastic and spiritual tradition. There we find texts that tell us about the transmission of religious know how in the relation between the experienced and the inexperienced (the *Apophthegmata* of the Desert Fathers or Cassian, for example), about how a school in the service of the Lord is to be conceived (Saint Benedict's *Rule*), about how one can acquire religious virtues (Evagrius of Pontus, Bernard's *De Gradibus Humilitatis*) and so on. More than any other texts, they tell us how a religious life has to be lived.

The medieval German mystic Master Eckhart (1260 -1328) rejects a mysticism that is concentrated on experiencing *transient* ecstasies. He is much more oriented towards the ideal of a mystical disposition or attitude. His ideal is not an ecstatic or visionary experience of God, but an inner divine life that colours *all* experiences of a person and carries one in all deeds. In this light, he sees the incarnation not just as an historical event, but as an existential event that concerns every one of us. The incarnation is to him an incorporation (in Polanyi's sense), an attempt to embody the Christian ideal. The Christian believer follows herein the word of Luke, who says "the kingdom of God is in you." The never ending process of learning to be a believer consists in Christ becoming the *habitus* of the soul, in trying to live, think and speak *from* Christ (and not just to live *for* or speak *to* Christ). When Master Eckhart discusses John 1, 14 ("The Word has become flesh and has lived in us"), he renders the meaning of "*habitavit in nobis*" with an alliteration: "*Habitavit, inquit, in nobis, id est habituavit.*"²⁵ Now, how do you learn this? How can one learn to live, think and speak from a divine source? Master Eckhart says that he who tries this will fare as someone who tries to learn to write.

A man should accept God in all things, and should accustom himself to having God present always in his disposition and his intention and his love. (...)

But a man in whom truly God is not, but who must grasp God in this thing or in that from outside, and who seeks God in unlike ways, be it in works or people or places, such a man does not possess God. (...)

On what does this true possession of God depend, so that we may truly have him?

This true possession of God depends on the disposition, and on an inward directing of reason and intention toward God, not on a constant contemplation in an unchanging manner, for it would be impossible to nature to preserve such an intention, and very laborious, and not the best thing either. A man ought not to have a God who is just the product of his thought, nor should he be satisfied with that, because if the thought vanished, God too would vanish. But one ought to have a God who is present, a God who is far above the notions of men and of all created things. That God does not vanish, if a man does not wilfully turn away from him.

The man who has God essentially present to him grasps God divinely, and to him God shines in all things; (...)

A man cannot learn this by running away, (...); but he must practice a solitude of the spirit, wherever or with whomever he is. He must learn to break through things and to grasp his God in them and to form him in himself powerfully in an essential manner. *This is like someone who wants to learn to write*. If he is to acquire the art, he must certainly practice it hard and long, however disagreeable and difficult this may be for him and however impossible it may seem. If he will practice it industriously and assiduously, he learns it and masters the art. To begin with, he must indeed memorize each single letter and get it firmly into his mind. Then, when he has

the art, he will not need to think about and remember the letters' appearance; he can write effortlessly and easily--and it will be the same if he wants to play the fiddle or to learn any other skill. It will always be enough for him to make up his mind to do the hard work the art demands; and even if he is not thinking about it all the time, still, whatever he may be thinking when he does perform it, this will be from the art he has learned.

So a man must be penetrated with the divine presence, and be shaped through and through with the shape of the God he loves, and be present in him, so that God's presence may shine out to him without any effort. What is more, in all things let him acquire nakedness and let him always remain free of things. But at the beginning there must be attentiveness and a careful formation within himself, like a schoolboy setting himself to learn.²⁶

It might be thought that the function of tacit knowledge is rather marginal in religion; that it only lays the foundations for something better or more important; that it offers but a substructure or infrastructure. I hope that Eckhart's text has indicated the contrary. There is no other aim of spiritual life but this: to know how to pray, to meditate, to confess, to love in order to live a life which is, in most senses of the expression, completely normal, but which springs from a hidden godly well. Religious knowledge that would be only and wholly explicit is of no meaning whatsoever for religion and religious life. A non-religious person too can acquire and possess it.

That one must learn to become a believer²⁷ is an insight that is often neglected in the philosophy of religion, but I don't believe it to be a philosophically redundant fact.²⁸

Endnotes

¹ J. WHITTAKER [1981], p. 40: "(...) if we cannot know enough about God to tell the difference between his true nature and figurative representations of it, then we cannot invest any version of the literal/non-literal distinction with any sense."

² I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by J.M.D. Meiklejohn, London: Dent, 1979, p. 114-5.

³ Polanyi (Budapest, 1891 -- Oxford, 1976) published his principal work *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* in 1958. For more information: SANDERS, A.F. [1988].

⁴ Compare Polanyi's comment in "Sense-Giving and Sense-Reading" (POLANYI [1969], p. 191): "Kant wrote of the process of subsuming particular instances under a general term that it was a 'skill so deeply hidden in the human soul that we shall hardly guess the secret that Nature here employs.' The secret was indeed inaccessible so long as one looked for an explicit procedure to account for the subsumption of particulars under a general term, but the secret can be found in a tacit operation of the mind."

⁵ POLANYI [1975], p. 42: "The characteristic structure of all our personal knowledge comes out even more vividly when we realize that all knowing is action (...)"

⁶ Compare WITTGENSTEIN [1994], § 150: "The grammar of the word "knows" is evidently closely related to that of "can," "is able to." But also closely related to that of "understands." ("Mastery" of a technique)."

⁷ POLANYI [1967], p. 7.

⁸ See *Journal of Personality*, 18 (1949) and *Psychological Review*, 58 (1951).

⁹ Polanyi wouldn't agree to an equation of the tacit with the unconscious. See POLANYI [1975], p. 39.

¹⁰ POLANYI [1967], p. 10.

¹¹ POLANYI [1967], p. 16.

¹² Compare ROUSE [1987], p. 117: "Theories, like other equipment, recede from thematic attention in order to highlight the things they make accessible to us. They themselves become the objects of attention only when we need better equipment to deal with the problems at hand."

¹³ POLANYI [1975], p. 39: "Suppose that it would be possible, at least in principle, to identify all the subsidiaries involved in achieving a particular focal integration. We would still find that anything serving as a subsidiary ceases to do so when focal attention is directed on it. It turns into a different kind of thing, *deprived of the meaning* it had while serving as a subsidiary."

¹⁴ Compare these verses from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "An die Deutschen" ("To the Germans")

"Oder kommt, wie der Strahl aus dem Gewölke kommt,

Aus Gedanken die Tat? Leben die Bücher bald?"

(Or comes, like sunburst out of clouds,

a deed out of thoughts? Will books come to life soon? -- my translation)

¹⁵ POLANYI [1975], p. 61: "Any rules we have must be applied, of course; and, to do this, we may have additional rules for their application. But we cannot go on having specific rules for the application of specific rules ad infinitum." It goes without saying that this is the same regressus ad infinitum-argument as can be found in the work of Kant, Ryle and Wittgenstein.

¹⁶ POLANYI [1958], p. 264: "But systematic forms of criticism can be applied only to articulate forms (...). We should not apply, therefore, the terms "critical" or "uncritical" to any process of tacit thought *by itself*; any more than we would speak of the critical or uncritical performance of a high-jump or a dance." POLANYI [1975], p. 37: "You cannot use your spectacles to scrutinize your spectacles."

¹⁷ POLANYI [1958], p. 285: "Yet we can apply to our action no test of the kind to which we appeal for proving or disproving an explicit declaratory statement. There is therefore no possibility either for doubting what we do (or declare we do) in the sense in which an explicit statement can be doubted."

¹⁸ For more information on tradition in this sense: ACTON [1953], NYIRI [1992], especially Ch. 5 and O'HEAR [1992].

¹⁹ POLANYI [1958], p. 53

²⁰ WHITTAKER (1981), p. 49: “This kind of understanding consists in seeing the *point* of what is to be said and believed about God. To have this understanding one must know what it would mean to *abide* by a religious teaching, to bring one’s thinking and living under its rule and to form one’s cares and concerns in accordance with its implications. Such understanding is largely a practical matter.” Whittaker doesn’t mention Polanyi in this article; GILL [1975] and HIGH [1986] however draw heavily on Polanyi for an elucidation of religious knowledge.

²¹ POLANYI [1958], p. 198: “(...) the worshipper dwells within the fabric of religious ritual, which is potentially the highest degree of indwelling that is conceivable. For ritual comprises a sequence of things to be said and gestures to be made which involve the whole body and alert our whole existence. Anyone sincerely saying and doing these things in a place of worship could not fail to be completely absorbed in them. He would be partaking devoutly in religious life.”

²² POLANYI [1958], p. 282.

²³ POLANYI [1958], p. 279.

²⁴ Compare LINDBECK [1984], p. 35: “The primary knowledge is not *about* the religion, nor *that* the religion teaches such and such, but rather *how* to be religious in such and such ways.” See also the interesting discussion of Lindbeck in PHILLIPS (1988).

²⁵ ECKHART, Meister [1989], nr. 118, p. 234.

²⁶ ECKHART, Meister (1981), p. 252-4, my italics.

²⁷ Compare DE PATER (1988), p. 75.

²⁸ I would like to thank Prof. Phil Mullins and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide a hard copy and a disk or an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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