

# Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith —A Personal Report

Thomas F. Torrance

[**Editor's Note:** Readers should recognize that Thomas Torrance's comments here are part of a many dimensional discussion reaching back several years and including several discussants. Much has been said and written about what Polanyi says about religion and what it means as well as about Polanyi's own religious commitments. In his introductory letter to the editor, Dr. Torrance identified the following essay as "a very personal contribution." At least a couple of earlier *TAD* pieces that are a part of the larger stream of discussion have some direct bearing on Torrance's article: In *TAD* 24:1 (1997-98), John Apczynski wrote a review article (pp. 32-34) on Colin Weightman's *Theology in a Polanyian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance*. In the same issue, Weightman responded to Apczynski's review (pp. 35-38); both articles comment on Torrance's interpretation of Polanyi. Further back in *TAD*'s history (*TAD* 14:1 (1987-88): 30), there is a letter from Torrance criticizing Harry's Prosch's comments made in a review of Drusilla Scott's *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi*, as well as comments in Prosch and Polanyi's *Meaning*. Harry Prosch responded directly to Torrance's charge that he "'bowdlerized' Polanyi's work and that Michael objected to this" (*TAD* 15:1 (1987-88): 24) in the following issue (pp. 24-25). Due to the incapacities of a stroke, Dr. Prosch cannot directly respond to the present essay. There are, of course, also discussions about *Meaning* and the status of religious meaning in the articles in the 1982 *Zygon* issue (17: 1 [March, 1982]) thematically devoted to "science and religion in the thought of Michael Polanyi." More recently, the *TAD* special issue on "Polanyi's realism" (26:3[1999-2000]) again touches similar issues.]

**ABSTRACT Key Words:** Christian faith, grace, worship, realism, tacit dimension, personal knowing, objectivity, science, real meaning, phenomenism.

*My personal relation with Polanyi, discussions with him in Oxford, contribution to the International Academy of the Philosophy of Science, the relevance of his innovative thought for Christian worship and theology, Magda and Michael in Oxford, the role of his literary executor.*

Michael Polanyi was born of Jewish parents in Hungary, but before or after his engagement to Magda Polanyi, a Christian, he committed himself to the Christian faith and in 1919 was baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. When I came to know Michael and Magda Polanyi, I realised that like her he was a Christian believer, but claimed that he did not have a strong feeling or urge toward Roman Catholicism, for in Hungary he felt that Catholicism was tarnished by an unfair treatment of the Jews. His thinking reveals the impact of classical Christian thought, such as that of St Paul and St. Augustine. He felt rather differently about Protestant Christianity, but was shocked by what he found in Germany. On the completion of his university studies in physical chemistry and medical science, he became a medical officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, when he reflected not a little about the relation between medical and scientific thinking and faith and activity. In his first academic appointment to a chair in Berlin, he lived near Albert Einstein, who at that time was married to a Serbian Orthodox scientist whom he had met in his studies in Switzerland, and who had an impact on his religious beliefs. However, she declined to live with him in Berlin, due to her antipathy to Germans, and they

were divorced. I know of nothing bearing directly on Christian belief in her relations with Einstein. But in Berlin, Einstein came under severe attacks from militant Nazis - again and again they prevented Einstein from getting the Nobel prize when he was in Berlin, and finally obstructed the awarding of the Nobel prize to him for his work on relativity theory. When the Nobel Prize was finally given to Einstein, it was for his work on Brownian motion, not for relativity theory. The situation became so hostile in Germany that Einstein wisely left Berlin for Princeton, to join the newly established Institute for Advanced Studies and Research, and there became known for his sympathy to Protestant Christian thought. He hung on the wall of his study a portrait of James Clerk Maxwell, the most devout and evangelically committed Christian scientist who, he claimed, had fundamentally altered the rational structure of science. There, probably due to him, the main avenue on the campus was called "Maxwell Avenue". In Princeton, Einstein was also befriended by Christian clergy and theologians in Princeton Theological Seminary, and lived on its campus, with theologians on both sides of his house.

Although Michael Polanyi was committed, as he once wrote, to the transcendent origin of his beliefs --"unless you believe, you will not understand", he reiterated. There is no evidence (known to me) of any discussion between Polanyi and Einstein about Christian belief. But in Princeton Einstein was daily in contact with Christian believers, theologians and scientists, and without doubt Christian institutions in the university and the city. One of Polanyi's school friends in Budapest, John von Neumann, was also given a post at the Advanced Institute. Eugene Wigner, one of his first pupils in Germany and a very good friend, had been given a chair in physics in Princeton University, but when he tried to get Polanyi to join him there, he was obstructed by fiercely anti-Marxist Americans who confused Michael with his brother. In Manchester, it was Professor T. W. Manson, the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University, a noted New Testament scholar, and a Scots Presbyterian, who befriended Michael Polanyi and used to take him to worship in the Presbyterian Church which Manson attended. As a Christian believer, Michael Polanyi took God as real and worship as important, and often referred to the latter, as also to the Pauline conception of salvation by grace, as analogous to the process of scientific discovery. Gracious and modest with high moral standards, his theology was largely "tacit" in his distinctive sense of that term and deep-seated. Both Polanyi and Manson were rather critical of the Marxist, and anti-Christian thinkers, such as Professor Blackett, and their positivist philosophy of natural and social science, in Manchester. Michael Polanyi engaged in critical discussion with Blackett and other Marxists in the university and their positivist notions of science and philosophy. He does not seem to have had a close contact with Bernard Lovell, the radio astronomer at Jodrell Bank, although he and Magda played tennis with him and his wife Joyce, a cousin of my wife Margaret.

Michael regarded the relation between faith and reason as fundamental, and was committed to restore the priority of belief even in science: he loved to recall the Augustinian statement, "Unless you believe, you will not understand" (actually it derives from Clement of Alexandria!). In face of the growing impact of secularism being fostered by Marxist naturalism on society, he felt increasingly the need to restore believing commitment to academic and scientific pursuits. It was clear to Polanyi that the relation of faith and reason in the Christian tradition, and classical ways of thinking about science and society, needed to be recovered. Man needs a purpose in science as in life that bears on eternity, as he wrote at the conclusion of his little book *The Tacit Dimension*. "Perhaps this problem cannot be attained on secular grounds alone. But its religious solution should become more feasible once religious faith is released from the pressure by an absurd vision of the universe, and so there will open up interest a meaningful world which could resound to religion"(92). Although that was written in 1966, it was these convictions that led him to ask for a new chair in the philosophy of science to be established, in his desire to counter the programme of secularist science and materialist and

positivist scientific method in British universities which was distorting the understanding of science through a false and deadening scientism, and to foster free personal inquiry sustained by commitment and heuristic vision which was fostered by Christian worship. It was under this conviction that his early books, *Science, Faith and Society*, and *The Logic of Liberty*, were published. A new chair concerned with post-critical thinking, heuristic knowledge and the philosophy of science was established in spite of sharp opposition and Michael Polanyi was appointed to it. Through that chair, he was concerned to restore the balance between faith and reason in science, and to argue for the concept and pursuit of pure science dedicated to the service of a transcendent reality, free from all temporal authority.

Bernard Lovell was somewhat disappointed not with Polanyi's convictions but with the idea he was moving from his chair in pure chemistry made famous by Dalton. However it became more and more clear that it was the role of religious commitment, and indeed of belief or the kind of faith found in the Christian tradition, evident in his frequent appeal to St Paul and St Augustine, that came to occupy an underlying role in Polanyi's post-critical basic heuristic thinking both in science and philosophy. That was later given outstanding exposition in his Aberdeen Gifford Lectures which he entitled *Personal Knowledge*. His conception of reality even in science, and of the all-important role of meaning in science, had undoubtedly a deep Christian orientation and feeling, even if it did not betray an explicitly asserted or denominational commitment. Yet it is as impossible to be religious, Polanyi used to say, without having a religion, as it is impossible to speak without having a language. Christian inquiry, he insisted, is worship, and it is as such that it fosters the kind of heuristic vision and inquiry that break free from traditional frameworks of thought into what is quite new. He once wrote: "Christian worship sustains, as it were an eternal, never to be consummated hunch, a heuristic vision which is accepted for the sake of its unresolvable tension. It is like an obsession with a problem known to be insolvable, which yet follows, against reason, unswervingly, the heuristic command: 'Look at the unknown!'. Christianity sedulously fosters, and in a sense permanently satisfies, man's craving for mental dissatisfaction by offering him the comfort of a crucified God."<sup>1</sup>

"The assumption that the world has some meaning, which is linked to our calling, as the only morally responsible beings in the universe, is an example of the supernatural aspect of experience which Christian interpretations of the universe explore and develop"<sup>2</sup>. Polanyi often referred to the creative power in the universe which meets our striving in terms of the Christian word for "grace". That is very evident, for example, in the way in which the personal character and thrust of his scientific thinking and activity were due to a deep Christian commitment influenced particularly by St Paul's teaching about redemption and Augustine's stress upon faith as the door to understanding, and upon the objective nature of meaningful reality. That was a primary aspect of Michael's thinking which, it seems to me, was set aside by Harry Prosch in his editing and reworking of Polanyi's book *Meaning* in which he reverted to what Drusilla Scott (recalling *The Tacit Dimension*, p. 32f) called "a cobblestone definition of reality"<sup>3</sup> That appeared to be a merely symbolical and phenomenalist conception of reality and free floating meaning which Michael Polanyi, in his conversations with me in Oxford, rather resented and repudiated. That is why, as I shall relate, he asked me to act as his literary executor after his death so that kind of twisting of his thought and his writings could not take place. What we miss in *Meaning*, as Prosch edited it, is the bearing in Michael Polanyi's thought of the actual effect of divine action in the life of people, and its objective ground and force. Thus, for example, the resurrection, would have no meaning for Christians if it had not actually taken place. Thus, as Drusilla Scott says: "What we miss in *Meaning* and what Polanyi's whole thought leads us to, is this actuality; the effect in the lives of ordinary suffering men of what actually happened in the life and death of Jesus, and of the meaning for them that these events revealed."<sup>4</sup>

I myself did not get to know Michael Polanyi until after he had delivered his Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen entitled, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, published in 1958. He had been proposed as Gifford Lecturer by my friend Professor Donald MacKinnon who then held the Chair of Moral Philosophy in Aberdeen University and was enthusiastically supported by Principal Tom Taylor. Donald had got to know Michael Polanyi in connection with the *Moot* (probably in 1944), a high-level group of Christian thinkers assembled by J.H. Oldham during the war who met in the Athenaeum in London. He had invited Michael Polanyi to join them in discussing important Christian issues pressing upon the Church and society as a result of the war. I was not a member of the Moot--John Baillie had objected to my being a member as a "Barthian" ! Nevertheless I was asked by Oldham to present them with a paper in reaction to one by the philosopher H. A. Hodges of Oxford, who had a special interest in the writings of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. That was in August 1941. I was very familiar with the work of Dilthey, whom I cited fully in my reply to Hodges, but was not present at that meeting of the Moot in the Athenaeum in London, nor was Michael for he did not actually become a member until later. I was greatly excited by the Aberdeen Gifford Lectures when published in 1958. And so I arranged with John Baillie to have Michael Polanyi invited to give us some lectures in New College, Edinburgh, when our friendship began. Before long, I was to get to know him very well in Oxford. Polanyi had by then retired from Manchester to a house in Oxford. There he was invited to become a Fellow at Merton College, where for several years until his death he took part in the life and worship of the college, where one of my friends, John R. Lucas, a devout Anglican, was the resident philosopher who was deeply concerned with mathematics and physics, and space and time. But that was the heyday of the linguistic philosophy dominated by the positivist and logicist thinking of the Vienna Circle, and its Oxford counterpart the linguistic philosophy and logical positivism of Gilbert Ryle and A.J. Ayer, the very kind of arid meaningless philosophy, hostile to Christian theology, of which Polanyi was very critical!

That was the situation in Oxford in 1969 when my book *Theological Science* was published by the Oxford University Press in which I had given not little attention to Michael Polanyi's thought, and was critical of Ryle and Ayer. Michael welcomed it very warmly, and we became fast friends, and met not infrequently when I was back in Oxford. After he read my *Theological Science* and we engaged in discussion about the relation of science to faith and theology, his Christian commitment seemed to be more and more firm and open (or less tacit!). I also got to know his dear wife Magda rather well, and was welcomed by her and Michael as a clergyman, as well as a theologian, in their home at 22 Upland Park Road, and stayed with them as a frequent visitor--that in fact became my home away from home in Oxford. When I stayed with Michael and Magda there or nearby, I learned how devout both he and she were and sensed the deep quiet Christian spiritual affinity between them. As a rule, Michael Polanyi was rather reticent about discussing his own religious beliefs, for some of his ardent supporters in the philosophy of science, like Marjorie Grene, were, I learned, rather hostile to religion. However, from my personal relations with them in their home, I had no doubt about the quiet depth and commitment of his faith, and of Magda's Christian devotion as well. As I learned from Magda, Marjorie Grene was rather hostile to her, as she did her best to shelter Michael from the attentions of admiring women!

In the rather critical thought of Oxford in those days, the Polanyis were not befriended very much by college dons, nor by the Anglican clergy but were by the Methodist minister who lived near them, and they not infrequently attended his church. One of their best friends was Lady Drusilla Scott, the wife of a retired diplomat, and the daughter of the Scottish philosopher A. D. Lindsay, the former Master of Balliol. Michael and I had common friends, T. M. Manson and Donald Mackinnon. We were also associated through our membership of the International Academy of the Philosophy of Sciences, a Dominican foundation based in Brussels. Some of Michael's most important papers were given there, and printed in the Proceedings of the

Academy, as well as elsewhere, and were later edited by Marjorie Grene and published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1969, as *Knowing and Being*, the year when the Oxford University Press published my *Theological Science*. Einstein was a member of the Academy, but I never saw him there. Karl Popper was also a member, but he and Michael did not get on very well together for, as Magda told me, Michael felt that Popper had “pinched” some of Michael’s distinctive ideas on the nature of scientific discovery, such as those presented in his paper, “The Unaccountable Element in Science”, later published in *Knowing and Being*. Evidently when Polanyi was present at the Academy, Popper stayed away, and when Popper was present Polanyi often was not! Another member of the Academy was Freddie Ayer, but it was a Dominican foundation, and I noticed him only once at a special anniversary meeting in Brussels after Polanyi had died.

Michael told me that he found my book *Theological Science* rather difficult because of its theological content, but appreciated what I had tried to do in it--in arguing for a proper realist scientific approach to theology--and applauded it! *Theological Science* was a revision of lectures I had given in the USA in 1959. When in our discussion about it, I asked Michael about his occasional references to Paul Tillich, he told me that he had turned away from his thought; and when I asked him about the relation of his thinking to French philosophers like Merleau-Ponty, he insisted that he was not a phenomenalist. It was then that he told me about his chagrin and disappointment with what Harry Prosch had done in his editing and presentation of *Meaning* which had been published by University of Chicago Press under both their names. In editing it, Prosch had given a somewhat phenomenalist slant to Michael Polanyi’s post-critical thought as a movement away from his critique of scientific objectivity, with a rather mystical view of Christianity, detached from the actual historical events and objectivity of the Christian message. In speaking of what Prosch had done, Michael referred to the fact that after the death of Einstein, something similar had been done in the presentation of his writings when they had sometimes been twisted round in an alien way. That was, Michael felt, rather like what Harry Prosch had done to his thought in *Meaning*. Then he turned to me, and asked me if I would act as his literary executor after he died, to prevent that sort of thing happening again. And I promised to do so. That is also why I have never referred to the book *Meaning* in what I have written about Michael Polanyi and his thought, for it distorts it rather seriously, especially after chapter three. However, someone called Colin Weightman has now published a book called *Theology in a Polanyian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance*, in which he accuses me of misunderstanding Polanyi, but has in fact, I believe, severely misunderstood Polanyi and my theology. In it, he has in fact bowdlerized my interpretation and use of Polanyi’s thought, charged me with not paying attention to *Meaning*, and backed up his attack on me by references to *Meaning*!

Unlike Prosch, Michael Polanyi, as I knew him, was certainly a Christian. Of particular importance in assessing his devout Christian commitment and belief, which he never paraded, is the powerful chapter in *Personal Knowledge* which he entitled “The Critique of Doubt”. In it, he wrote of the Christian faith as “a heuristic impulse”:

A heuristic impulse can live only in the pursuit of its proper enquiry. The Christian enquiry is worship. The words of prayer and confession, the actions of the ritual, the lesson, the sermon, the church itself, are the clues of the worshipper’s striving towards God. They guide his feelings of contrition and gratitude and the craving for the divine presence, while keeping him safe from distracting thoughts (*PK*, 281).

Only a Christian who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and

only he can enter into the religious meaning of the Bible. Theology and the Bible together form the context of worship and must be understood in their bearing on it...(PK. 281).

That was how some of us in Britain presented and discussed his thought in the book *Belief in Science and in the Christian Life. The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh, 1980).

My last discussions with Michael Polanyi had to do, if I remember correctly, with the nature of light in the thought of Einstein and James Clerk Maxwell. I had become increasingly interested in the science and faith of James Clerk Maxwell, and wanted to discuss it with him. But I had really left it too late. The last letter I had from him was after the death of his elder son George, the economist, which he and Magda felt very deeply. In it he wrote about the visit he and Magda had paid to Guildford Cathedral to celebrate Easter, where in their worship he was overwhelmed with the actual resurrection of Christ. He was not to live very long afterwards.

Magda and her younger son, John, asked me to take the funeral service in Oxford. He was a Nobel Laureate Professor of Chemistry in Toronto, who had married the daughter of an Anglican clergyman in Shanghai, and attended St Thomas Church in Toronto. Alas, I was quite unable to take the funeral as I was completely tied up with my moderatorial engagements in the Church of Scotland at that time, but my younger son, Iain, who was a postgraduate student at Oriel College, Oxford, represented me at the funeral services.

I visited Magda at 22 Upland Park Road, as soon as I could afterwards, and arranged to return to help her with Michael's papers and affairs when she confirmed that she and John wanted me to act as Michael's literary executor. This called for a long visit to Oxford to check over and make a preliminary inventory of his books and pamphlets. After some discussion, she agreed to accept the offer of the University of Chicago to establish a special section of the Regenstein Library devoted to Michael's books and papers. It was hoped at first that they might be kept and housed in Oxford, but Magda needed the financial resources the University of Chicago offered for the books in support for her retirement. After a while, I returned to Oxford with a friend and helper in New College, Dr Christopher Kaiser (now Professor of Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Michigan) who was both a scientist and a theologian, to assist me in making an inventory of Polanyi's papers and books, which took us several days to do. Among them I found a copy of Kurt Gödel's epoch-making little book, *Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der Principia Mathematica und verwandter Systeme I*, which he had arranged to be made for him by Edinburgh University Library, and which he used in writing *Personal Knowledge*. It was in Edinburgh later that Gödel's work was translated by one of our mathematicians, Bruce Meltzer, and published by Oliver & Boyd in 1962. I asked Magda if I might keep that xeroxed copy in memory of Michael, to which she gladly agreed. All the other books, pamphlets, scientific papers, and relevant correspondence, from Michael's library, were duly collected by Chicago University for housing and display in their Regenstein Library. In it, they lodged their own scientifically checked and prepared catalogue. They include, it may be added, the correspondence between Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn, in which Kuhn admitted that he had taken the concept of paradigm from Michael!

I visited Magda Polanyi in Oxford as often as I could, and we corresponded with one another regularly for several years, until she too died to rejoin Michael in heaven waiting for the resurrection which they had already experienced together in spirit in Guildford Cathedral.

When Magda died, I asked John Polanyi in Toronto to take over from me the role of literary executor

of his father's works, especially as the copyright had now devolved from Magda to him. Again and again, questions of copyright raised by authors in different countries, who wished to cite from Michael's writings, had cropped up, when I always consulted with Magda. But when she died, I persuaded John to take over the role of literary executor from me, which he has done. I hope and pray that those who now write for *Tradition and Discovery* will remain faithful to Michael and his thought and not try to twist his ideas for their own ends.

## Endnotes

1 Cited by Drusilla Scott from *Personal Knowledge*, p.199, *Everyman Revived, The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi*, 1985, p.185.

2 Drusilla Scott, op.cit. p.,186.

3 Op. cit, p. 190.

4 Op.cit, p. 194.

5 *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 280 & 281.

## 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. MLA or APA style are preferred. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Punctuation and spelling may follow either British or American standard practices. 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.

Phil Mullins  
Missouri Western State College  
St. Joseph, Missouri 64507  
Fax (816) 271-5680  
Phone: (816)271-4386  
E-mail: mullins@mWSC.edu

Walter Gulick  
Montana State University, Billings  
Billings, Montana 59101  
Fax (406) 657-2187  
Phone: (406) 657-2904  
E-mail: wgulick@msu-b.edu

## Notes on Contributors

**C. P. Goodman** wrote a Ph. D. dissertation on Polanyi's thought at Sheffield University. He has published articles in *TAD* (23:3 [1996-97]) and in *Appraisal*. He is particularly interested in Polanyi's social and political ideas (cpgoodman@lineone.net).

**Richard Gelwick** has recently retired from the University of New England. He was for many years General Coordinator of the Polanyi Society. Gelwick published the first bibliography of Polanyi's non scientific writing and is also author of *The Way of Discovery; An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (rprogel@juno.com).

**Percy Hammond** is a retired professor of electrical engineering. His speciality is the design of electrical machines. He has written several books on engineering electromagnetics. He is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering and of the Institutions of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (percy@mahogany.sucs.soton.ac.uk)

**Thomas F. Torrance** was born in China in 1913; he was friend of Michael Polanyi's for more than twenty years. Torrance is a widely published Christian theologian and an international churchman. For many years, he has been interested in and written about Christianity and science (t.torrance@bigfoot.com).