

How “Catholic” Is *Personal Catholicism*?

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This review essay argues that the emphasis on the personal commitments sustaining all knowledge, while permitting some fruitful insights into structural parallels between Newman's and Polanyi's epistemological positions, finally is not fully satisfactory for developing a theological program. Moleski's effort to develop such theological insights may be advanced if it were supplemented by incorporating a more detailed structural analysis of the illative sense and of tacit knowing.

Any attempt to portray accurately the basic thrust of Michael Polanyi's theory of knowledge requires that the interpreter develop an angle of vision through which Polanyi's view may be systematically elaborated. This tactic is desirable so that the “overall coherence” of Polanyi's position may be discerned and then expanded or developed. It provides a frame of reference within which the evolution of Polanyi's thought as it was developed in the course of his writings might be approached in an integrated fashion. Thus, for example, the major studies by Richard Gelwick and Harry Prosch present Polanyi's theory under the patterns of the process of discovery and of a therapeutic healing of the intellectual ills besetting Western culture, respectively. In his major new study, *Personal Catholicism*,¹ Martin Moleski interprets the fundamental thrust of Polanyi's theory from the vantage point of the role of personal commitments in the upholding of all our knowledge. The feature of “commitment” functioned very prominently in *Personal Knowledge*, before Polanyi had developed his later elaboration of the “structure” of tacit knowing (although all these features, as Marjorie Grene has persuasively argued,² were already informally present in this earlier work).

Very likely Moleski adopts this hermeneutical stance because his larger aim is to explore Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge in light of John Henry Newman's understanding of the illative sense. He begins with two complementary chapters, which place the epistemological reflections of Newman and Polanyi within their respective biographical and historical contexts. In Newman's case, the issue concerns his effort to explain his conversion to Roman Catholicism. In contrast to the demand for strong evidence to serve as a foundation for all judgments of certitude, Newman pointed to the informal working of the “illative sense” of a person making judgments in concrete matters, including the certitude expected in cases of fundamental commitments. In the case of Polanyi, the problem involved Polanyi's conviction that science, and by extension all forms of knowing, were grounded in personal commitments, many of which the knower could not even articulate. The emphasis here is on the importance of the fundamental commitments sustaining every judgment, which Polanyi elaborated in *Personal Knowledge*. Since in both cases the focus is on the personal accreditation of fundamental claims, these chapters do not quite function as full-fledged introductions to Newman's or Polanyi's epistemologies. Rather their work is used to provide a conceptual framework supporting Moleski's understanding of the necessity of personal commitment as the basis of all knowing, including, of course, religious faith.

Hence, the major purpose of this comparative exposition is to defend the necessity of faith for upholding our fundamental convictions in our “post-critical” age and then to develop implications for the

theological task, illustrated with concluding examples drawn from the Roman Catholic theological community. When Moleski addresses the specific issue of the personal grounds of our knowing, his comparative strategy provides some helpful insights. For example, the way in which Newman subtly explores how the illative sense allows a person to judge the outcome of a cumulation of probabilities with certitude whereas if taken singly in isolation they would not is nicely illumined by Polanyi's notion of the tacit integration of subsidiaries (125-6). In cases such as this one, where the patterns of knowing uncovered by Newman and Polanyi are juxtaposed, Moleski helpfully advances the reader's understanding of the role of personal judgment in sustaining fundamental commitments.

Nevertheless by situating Polanyi's understanding of knowing within this interpretative framework, Moleski opens his theological application to consequences that are ambiguous and, in my estimation at least, unsatisfactory. His emphasis on the unformalized and unformalizable commitments that regularly ground the concrete act of knowing, without formally contextualizing the structure of tacit knowing within the forms of bodily, linguistic, historical, and cultural indwelling, tends to leave the impression that knowing is fundamentally arbitrary or capricious. Note well that this is decidedly not Moleski's intention, since he clearly observes how Polanyi places the act of tacit knowing within the context of intending a reality beyond the knower (116). The problem is that these structural elements of Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge are simply acknowledged without being sufficiently incorporated into Moleski's overall position. For Polanyi, the "self-set standards" by which a person responsibly affirms an aspect of reality are embedded in a rich textured web of patterns of indwelling so that these standards are never simply private or isolated. Again, while Moleski acknowledges this, his emphasis on the personal judgment creating the grounds of knowing obscures this crucial dimension.

These unsatisfactory consequences emerge in the final chapter where Moleski develops his personal version of a post-critical theology derived from his appropriations of Newman and Polanyi. A preliminary ambiguity emerges when Moleski discusses Polanyi's "theology" – even though he acknowledges, as most students of Polanyi would, that Polanyi does not really propose a theology in his writings (141-3). I suspect that Moleski here is conflating Polanyi's personal belief in God (or lack thereof) with his ruminations about Christianity. Should one suppose that Polanyi had no (or at best a highly attenuated) belief in God, it would be fair to conclude that his statements about religion are not grounded in any kind of "real assent" insofar as his personal commitments do not open him to the transcendent reality to which the religious statements might presumably refer. (Such a supposition could be supported by noting Polanyi's typical reference to matters Christian or religious in the third person, not in the first.) I think that this is the sort of point Moleski is making when he declares that Newman and Polanyi constructed dissimilar theologies (143). But even if Polanyi did not personally accept Christian commitments, why should his "theology" – in the sense of an articulation of a religious tradition – be linked so rigorously to one's personal commitments? Surely, an interested "outsider" (that is, one who does not share in the personal commitments that normally sustain the members of a religious community) might understand and even contribute to a community's theological reflections? Has Moleski's focus on the personal commitments sustaining knowledge obscured this point?

This ambiguity arises again when Moleski interprets Polanyi to deny any real assent to God because he declares in *Personal Knowledge* that the existence of God is not properly taken as a "fact." Certainly this may mean that Polanyi believed that there is no thing "real and external" to the act of worship (148), although I would disagree. (This is, admittedly, a notoriously contentious issue among students of Polanyi.) Nevertheless, should not Polanyi's personal commitments be a secondary consideration for an appropriate explication of his intent on this matter? Might he not be offering, as part of his challenge to logical positivism

in science, his own appropriation of the traditional Christian theological insight into the analogical character of language about God? If we place his observations as a reflection, not of his personal commitments, but on the way the living tradition of Christian worship might function for believers, then “God” would be that toward which all the worshippers’ strivings tended, and this could never be appropriately identified as a fact. In a different setting, Moleski actually acknowledges that the concept of “God” may function for Polanyi as the reference to the ultimate context within which everything is to be understood (162). Whence this ambiguity?

There are further examples of these sorts of ambiguities regarding the meaning of revelation and doctrine and their relationship to the teaching authority of the church (155-60), the nature of authority and the papacy (168-70), and the significance of “breaking out” (180-1) and its relationship to the development of doctrine (167). These are all manifestations, in my reading of Moleski’s position, of his emphasis on the personal commitments grounding the activity of knowing without paying sufficient systematic attention to the attendant structural elements of indwelling. There are many resources within Moleski’s work for moving toward such a clarification. He speaks of a “visionary theology” that may be sustained by “a renovation of a patristic method of theology” (175). What this enticing suggestion points toward is not clear to me. I would propose that it should acknowledge something along these lines: only by means of dwelling in a religious tradition does the personal commitment of faith unfold, and the structural elements of this indwelling ought to be explicitly incorporated into the formulation of a theology; to focus on the personal commitment grounding faith does not present as full an analysis.

This review and recommendation undoubtedly reflect my own personal religious background. Paradoxically, even though Moleski and I share the same background, I have found his emphasis on the personal commitments grounding knowing to be somewhat discordant with this background. The title I have affixed over these ruminations whimsically suggests this. Moleski’s choice of a dialogue partner for Polanyi’s thought and the specific substance of his theological reflections are thoroughly “Catholic” in character; his emphasis on the personal commitment of the knower, however, I found to be quite “evangelical” in orientation.

Endnotes

³ *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* by Martin X. Moleski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000) xxii + 222 pp.

² See her “Introduction” to *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. xiv.

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; (7) five essays by Michael Polanyi.