

Evangelical Catholicism and the Tacit Dimension of Theology

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Moleski responds to reviews of Personal Catholicism by Joseph Kroger and John Apczynski. He argues that theology is tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge and therefore cannot be fully articulated. He portrays the Roman Catholic tradition as an interpretative framework that differs from scientific frameworks by being bound to a particular revelation made in history which is then preserved by a Specific Authority.

Let me begin by thanking Kroger and Apczynski for their thoughtful and attentive reading of *Personal Catholicism*. Their remarks have helped me to recognize afresh both how valuable it is to use post-critical epistemology to explore religious commitments.

Kroger is correct that I glossed over the development in Polanyi's thought from a static image of tacit knowledge to a more dynamic understanding of tacit knowing as a process. It seems to me that the two perspectives are complementary and not contradictory. I regret it if in my enthusiasm for the tacit dimension I have given the impression that there is no value in articulation. Far from it. It is only by articulation that one can say—and communicate to others—that all knowing is tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge. Theology can neither be fully tacit nor fully articulate. It is, like all human intellectual endeavors, embedded in the tacit dimension.

Tacit acts of comprehension and of commitment precede, accompany, and flow from those acts which we can clarify, formalize, focus on, and articulate. In the milieu of the Enlightenment, Roman Catholic theology tended to adopt Cartesian models of knowing, acting as if faith could be reduced to a handful of propositions that then could be manipulated by formal logic to generate and sustain all of the dogmas of the faith, and then listed in a catechism for believers to memorize. The post-critical philosophy of Newman and Polanyi is a wonderful tonic for the sterile syllogisms of neo-thomism. Their epistemology reminds us that there is much more to thought and things than can be captured by rigorous logic and precise speech. I do not think—and never intended to say—that theology is “ultimately futile,” only that it is, like all human speaking, limited in its power to render the fullness of what God has given us in the person of Jesus.

Kroger asks, “Is it faith awareness that is subsidiary and tacit or is it theological dogma?” It seems to me that both have tacit and articulate dimensions. Our attention can range widely, now bringing this aspect of faith or theology into focus, now that aspect. The skill of reflecting critically on the faith, like all skills, has both tacit and articulate dimensions. In weighing the value of these two, I think that Polanyi is right to give priority to the tacit dimension: all theology is either tacit or is rooted in the tacit dimension.

For me, it seems reasonable to say that a part is not the whole. Thinking and speaking of faith, God, Jesus, or myself causes me to focus, for a moment, on one aspect or another of much larger realities. It seems important to me to remember that the part of faith or reason that I can put into words is not the whole of faith or reason. We always see more than we can say, and it is from the seeing, the tacit act of comprehension, that

all speaking draws its meaning. Words do not make contact with reality; people do. Contact with the realities of faith is first and foremost a tacit act, and only secondarily something that can be formalized and organized through the skills of theological analysis. Even as I speak of one aspect of believing, I am tacitly aware of many others which modify the meaning of what I am saying. I cannot express this vision all at once, nor can I ever reduce it to a set of propositions in a system of formal logic. Saying and seeing are always two different kinds of operations, and neither can take the place of the other.

Apczynski says that I tend “to leave the impression that knowing is fundamentally arbitrary or capricious.” I reply with Polanyi that “It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective” (*PK*, 65). When we adopt an interpretative framework, we make a disposition of ourselves that changes not only our view of reality, but changes us, too. It is true, as Apczynski suggests, that “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,” but that is a far cry from saying that all theology can or must be done non-committally.

In writing about personal Catholicism, I had a dual focus. On the one hand, I wanted to appropriate what Polanyi and Newman together teach about personal knowledge. On the other hand, I also wanted to appropriate the lesson taught by evangelical Christianity about the need for a personal relationship with Jesus as the foundation of the Christian life. Roman Catholicism suffers when too much attention is given to its institutions as if they could exist or have meaning apart from personal relationships. It seems to me that theology comes from and should lead back to something other than itself.

It makes good sense to me to think of the Roman Catholic Church as a tradition, an interpretative framework with both tacit and articulate components. As Polanyi rightly notes, the Roman Catholic tradition includes a Specific Authority very different from the General Authority of science. In choosing to dwell in the Roman Catholic framework, I do not expect to be able to break out of it as scientists expect to break out of their existing interpretative frameworks. The discoveries of the faith, in my view, should always lead the believer more deeply into the same reality of the love of God made manifest in Jesus. The developments of dogma as described by Newman are permanent boundary markers for the investigation of what Catholics believe about this foundational, historic event. Scientists, by contrast, do not have a decisive revelation made once in history through the presence of a person. They can repeat observations and duplicate experiments at will. Their investigation does not have the kind of focus and specificity that is present in a religion which holds that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This, I think, is where Newman and Polanyi part company. The goal of the Roman Catholic tradition is to hand on to others what was handed on to us in the deposit of faith. The goal of Christianity in Polanyi’s view, as far as I can tell, seems to resemble that of science: to pursue contact with divine reality in an open-ended, non-dogmatic fashion. If Newman is right that God has revealed things to us in Jesus that cannot be known in any other way, then it makes sense to me that revelation should be guarded through commitment to a Specific Authority and to the findings (dogmas) of that Authority. If Polanyi is right, then Christians should operate on the model of General Authority and can freely say whatever they see in their own religious experience without having to draw from or contribute to a particular religious tradition.