

# Polanyi on Religion

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*This article explores Polanyi's views on religion. Reviewing the debate on his understanding of religion, which originated in Richard Gelwick and Harry Prosch's conflicting readings of Polanyi on the theme, the article proposes that there are ambiguities within his writings on the theme which cannot be resolved. There is a weakness in Polanyi's work on religion which reflects his limited experience of religious practices and theological traditions. Nevertheless, his insight that religious knowledge is rooted in the practices of religious worship is one from which theology has much to learn.*

Polanyi's writings on religion present scholars seeking to expound and interpret his work with a conundrum.<sup>1</sup> While what he writes on this theme is woven into the fabric of his work and brought into juxtaposition with his most acute epistemological insights, most commentators believe that his grasp of the subject matter of religion lacks the surefootedness and penetration which marks his treatment of scientific themes. He has some fascinating things to say, but these are mixed up with ideas which are – to a greater or lesser degree – misconceived, confused and often betray an insufficient familiarity with religious practice and theological articulation. Martin Moleski is undoubtedly correct when he writes, "Because of Polanyi's lack of formal training in theology and because of his independence from any particular Christian tradition, it may be somewhat unfair to expect precision and clarity from him in his reflection on religious issues."<sup>2</sup>

A good number of theologians have adopted Polanyi's broader epistemological insights into their work, and one might anticipate many further developments of this kind. But, given their considerable limitations, do Polanyi's writings *on religion* have a contribution to make to theology? I believe that they do, although it is clear to me that a positive take-up of this strand of his thought must be highly selective and sensitive to the problematical nature of this aspect of his work. In this article I shall consider how this might be done.

I will start by offering a brief reconsideration of the kinds of disagreement which have emerged between Polanyi scholars in their interpretations of his writings on religion. These are a result not only of the lack of clarity, but also a marked inconsistency of development to be found in his writing. Anyone approaching this aspect of Polanyi's work expecting to find a consistent and coherent core will be disappointed. This is the negative aspect of what I want to say. Positively, I will suggest that, notwithstanding some substantial weaknesses, Polanyi has a creative contribution to make to the work of theology and religious understanding. In particular, he helps us to see that religious knowledge is established through participation within religious communities, and the many varied practices which constitute their life, and that the explicit articulation of religious belief is rooted in participation within such communities.

## Polanyi on Religion: the Debate

The degree of ambiguity in Polanyi's writing on religion is indicated by the disagreement between commentators about whether Polanyi believed in the existence of God, apart from the integrating processes of

the human imagination. This was the point at issue in the debate between Richard Gelwick and Harry Prosch in the late 1970s and early 80s.<sup>3</sup>

In his review of Richard Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery*<sup>4</sup> Prosch claims that Gelwick fails to take account of certain distinctions which Polanyi makes between science and what he came to call 'works of the imagination' (such as symbols, metaphors, poems, dramas, art, myth, ritual, and religion).<sup>5</sup> Prosch believes that these distinctions become 'very subtle' but that Gelwick's failure to recognise them leads his interpretation of Polanyi astray. Prosch admits that the distinctions are most fully articulated in *Meaning*, where he represents the distinctions by way of contrasting pairs: 'self-centred' as opposed to 'self-giving' and 'natural integrations' as opposed to 'transnatural integrations'. But he claims that they are already present in *Personal Knowledge*. In the latter Polanyi speaks of *verification* in connection with perception and science, and *validation* with respect to other 'acceptances'.<sup>6</sup> Prosch writes of Polanyi:

Although he held that *all* meanings are *created* by minds in their activity of integrating subsidiary clues into focal wholes through a dwelling in these subsidiary clues looking toward the focal wholes, the meanings achieved in science are understood by us to be intimations of realities that exist independently of ourselves. This is part of our universal intent with respect to our perception and thought of them and why we can claim that our thought of them is *true*. We also expect these realities to manifest themselves in unpredictable ways in the future, so that, of course, we do not ever know that we know any of these realities at any moment fully and wholly just as they are.<sup>7</sup>

Discovery is a paradigm for scientific knowing because the object of our knowledge is a rational coherence in nature understood by us to have been in existence before our discovery of it. This, Prosch claims, is not the case with works of the imagination: "Polanyi was very clear... that, in contrast to the above situation, the works of our imagination are created by us. They do not exist independently of us. Their meanings *become* realities; but the existence of these meanings always depends not only upon the fact that they were initially creations of man but also, and more importantly, in that their validity depends upon their *continuing* to be created out of incompatibles... by acts of imagination on the part of these [sic] who continue to be moved by them."<sup>8</sup> Consequently such integrations are and remain 'transnatural' constructions which may be *valid*<sup>9</sup> but, to quote Prosch again, "they can never assume the same status ontologically as the natural realities or meanings aimed at in perception and science. Thus any *verification* of them is simply out of the question."<sup>10</sup> Prosch will allow that transnatural constructions may be regarded as discoveries, "but not of an independently existing reality or of a further dimension of such a reality not available to 'science.'"<sup>11</sup> Prosch claims that Gelwick tends to submerge differences and to imply that art and religion expand our horizon of realities as though they were dealing with the same kind of things that are discovered in science – while being beyond that which science can discover. Prosch insists that for Polanyi we are dealing with two very different kinds of reality.

Gelwick responds to Prosch by denying any such sharp distinction. Not only this, but he sees the introduction of such a distinction as a serious threat to the substance of Polanyi's broader project. Gelwick warns that "The consequence of Prosch's view is extremely serious. It would mean that, while Polanyi restored the role of faith in all knowing, he had done it only to believe in God as a figment of our imagination. Such a purpose... was never held by Polanyi. Indeed, he did intend to renew our ability to believe in the truth and reality of God known in our Jewish and Christian heritage."<sup>12</sup>

Gelwick believes that as we speak of the scientist's ever-deepening knowledge of nature, "so also is the theologian called to ever-deepening knowledge of God through the *logos* of the Christian revelation."<sup>13</sup> Gelwick acknowledges the distinction which Polanyi makes between validation and verification in *Personal Knowledge*. He also acknowledges that our personal participation is generally greater in a validation than it is in verification, as the 'emotional coefficient of assertion' is intensified as we pass from the sciences into the neighbouring domains of thought. But both verification and validation are everywhere an acknowledgement of a commitment: they claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker.<sup>14</sup> The distinction here, in Gelwick's view, is one of degree – the degree of personal participation in the act of knowing. It is not the case that we can have verification of things that exist independently and validation of those things which do not. Gelwick comments: "To put my criticism of Prosch sharply, it seems that he has taken a positivist stance on what is real. Prosch's statement seems to imply that science has a superior status because its meanings or ideas can be tested by perceived facts, and only ideas so tested indicate external reality. Such a position not only contradicts Polanyi's views of reality but the purpose of his epistemological program."<sup>15</sup>

Gelwick is concerned that Prosch is once again leading us towards a separation of fact and value in his insistence upon dichotomising the kinds of integration which are achieved in science and the arts. He also points out that if Prosch wishes to imply that verification represents superior ontological status, this is in contradiction to Polanyi's view of the hierarchy of ontological levels. Transnatural integrations occur at a higher level of ontology and, all the more emphatically, bear on external realities. Gelwick writes:

When Polanyi spoke of reality, he spoke of it in a very inclusive way, not confined to tangibles or to the levels of empirical verification. He defined reality as that which has the power to manifest itself in indeterminate and unexpected ways in the future. The capacity of an entity to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future is an indication that it is an aspect of reality "possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect." This conception holds as much, perhaps more, for religion and theology as for perceptual observations and science.<sup>16</sup>

The debate between Gelwick and Prosch is extended in Prosch's response to Gelwick in the same number of *Zygon*.<sup>17</sup> Here Prosch seeks to show that religion for Polanyi is a reality *according to Polanyi's definition of reality*, which is to say: "that from which we expect indeterminate properties to arise in the future, properties of which we have not yet dreamed."<sup>18</sup> He goes on to say, "These properties have, as it were, a life and development of their own which we can neither control nor anticipate; they are not products of our subjective whims or fancies."<sup>19</sup> Prosch is saying, in essence, that in Polanyi's scheme we can talk about 'religious realities' without implying any external referent (existing independently of human imagination) or reducing religion to subjectivity. Prosch clarifies the point when he writes, "the only shred of reality, in the sense of existence independently of us, that God has in Polanyi's later thought is the gradient of deeper meaning which seems to evoke the achievement of greater meaning in all life and thought."<sup>20</sup> In an intriguing biographical note Prosch discloses:

I recall trying, myself, upon several occasions (once when he was preparing some of the lectures on which *Meaning* was later based) to convince Polanyi that no religion could be founded without its including somewhere in its lore the notion of its own *real* supernatural origin and that the supernatural was therefore a necessary feature of any religion which became a "going concern." I was never able to succeed in getting him to admit this. He really

had a difficult time understanding a belief in the factual reality of the religiously supernatural as anything much more than magic or superstition.<sup>21</sup>

If this is indeed what Polanyi's view was towards the end of his life it must be noted that it seems to contradict his discussion of the 'supernatural' in *Personal Knowledge* (see *PK* 284).<sup>22</sup> But Prosch claims that Polanyi "was enthralled by the imaginative, transnatural union of incompatibles involved in Christianity and did not seem to find the supernatural elements in this vision to be any more necessary to hold as statements of fact or of reality than he found the "story" in poems and plays necessary to hold as statements of fact or reality."<sup>23</sup>

Many other Polanyi scholars have debated his view on religion, as I have noted, and opinion is divided about what he really thought. Colin Weightman, like Prosch, is of the view that Polanyi had no belief in a God who exists independently of human imagination. Nevertheless, he offers some advice that should be heeded: "I am conscious myself of the need for caution since all commentators on Polanyi are agreed (I think) that Polanyi is the opposite of open and clear about his own religious commitments. Even those who confidently venture an assessment should at the very least admit that his "view" on "God" needs to be carefully teased out or perhaps carefully extrapolated from clues in the text since it is definitely not "up front"."<sup>24</sup>

The disagreement expressed in the debate about Polanyi's views on religion is only compounded by his reluctance to express his own personal religious beliefs. Close collaborators came to quite different conclusions about Polanyi's *personal* Christian convictions and this is illustrated by the comments of T. F. Torrance, who became Polanyi's literary executor, and Harry Prosch with whom Polanyi co-authored *Meaning*.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand Torrance writes of Polanyi's "deep Christian commitment influenced particularly by St Paul's teaching about redemption and Augustine's stress upon faith as the door to understanding."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand Prosch comments: "At one point Polanyi did seem to think of himself as a fully practising Christian. When I knew him he obviously was not one."<sup>27</sup>

The debate about Polanyi's views on religion reflects a substantial uncertainty about whether the God of whom Polanyi speaks has an existence which is independent of human imagination. The secondary literature only serves to show that Polanyi's position on this question is far from clear.

## **The Roots of Disagreement**

The roots of the disagreement surely go back to ambiguities in Polanyi's own work. While religion is not one of the central themes in his writing he does have a good deal to say on the subject.<sup>28</sup> *Meaning*, in that it is co-authored with Prosch, introduces an additional difficulty. Prosch claims, in the preface to the book, that "these are...[Polanyi's] ideas, expressed for the greatest part in his own language." (*M* x) But Prosch is not editor but co-author of the book, and the significance of his hand cannot be ignored.<sup>29</sup> For this reason it may be appropriate to put the greater emphasis upon the material to be found in *Personal Knowledge*.<sup>30</sup> A complete commentary on Polanyi's writings on religion is not possible within the limited scope of this article. The comments which follow presuppose some familiarity with Polanyi's treatment of the theme.<sup>31</sup>

The first thing to be said is that Polanyi's discussion of religion in *Personal Knowledge* is marked by the oddity of its approach. It resembles neither the descriptive work of the religious anthropologist, nor the confessional, doctrinal or systematising approaches of the theologian or liturgist. It represents something of

a ‘scatter-shot’ approach, picking up various themes which, while providing many intriguing insights, fail to offer a satisfying and consistent picture of either religious practice or a justification of religious knowing. There appear to be two substantial reasons for this. The first, which I noted at the outset, is that Polanyi was insufficiently integrated, in a personal way, into the life and practice of any particular religious community. The second is that when he confronts religious themes, he invariably does so by marshalling epistemological strategies which he has established *primarily* in the realm of science.<sup>32</sup> Clearly these insights *do* have implications beyond science. But if the strength of Polanyi’s theory of knowledge derives from his rootedness in scientific practice, it follows that the effectiveness of any adaptation of these insights in other spheres of practice and reflection will be dependent, to some considerable degree, upon its rootedness *in* those other spheres of life.<sup>33</sup>

It is my view that Polanyi shifts from a predominantly *a posteriori* approach with respect to science, to a predominantly *a priori* approach to religion and theology. There is, in Polanyi’s work, a desire to generalise which has the potential to weaken his most acute insights. Polanyi *is* concerned to establish the significance of his epistemological themes across a broad range of concerns. This can be seen in the ‘articulate systems’ of *Personal Knowledge* and the ‘integration of incompatibles’ of *Meaning*. To offer two examples: in the first passage of *Personal Knowledge* in which Polanyi deals with religious themes<sup>34</sup>, he considers mystical contemplation as a particular case of the general phenomenon of ‘breaking out’ of an articulate system. He has generated this insight in his reflections upon the phenomenon of scientific discovery; now he is looking to apply it in other spheres. In the second passage<sup>35</sup> he considers the nature of doubt and indwelling in relation to Christian worship, having reflected on the theme of belief and doubt in terms of its significance in scientific progress.

Polanyi is, among other things, a systematiser, and he comes to religion with a generalising scheme in hand – a scheme which is, more often than not, derived from his work in science.<sup>36</sup> He does not *start* with ‘religion’, ‘religious belief’, or ‘Christianity’ as a phenomenon, nor does he appear to derive his generalising schemes (or interpretive frameworks) from an indwelling of the religious life. Polanyi typically starts with the nature of scientific knowledge and it is here that his most incisive ideas are formed.

Polanyi gives the appearance of being wary of dealing with the phenomena of religious faith, practice and tradition in a direct way. When he refers to religion he is generally either following up, or expanding upon, a theme which has already been established in another context, or demonstrating substantially unacknowledged continuities in the way in which we come to know things in science and religion.<sup>37</sup> In both endeavours the phenomena of religious belief and practice are typically overlooked in all but the sketchiest of detail.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi describes the search for God in terms of his theory of heuristic passion. But the desire to ‘discover’ God must be distinguished from others because it is a desire which cannot be fulfilled. It is ‘the discovery that can never be made’. I do not deny that this may have some resonances with the kinds of things that might be said from within the religious traditions but, as it stands, it is woefully inadequate. For example, from within the Christian tradition, the theme of ongoing pilgrimage must be balanced by others, such as God’s acceptance, the forgiveness of sins and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

If we are to take Polanyi’s comments on religion to refer primarily to the Christian faith, a further set of issues come into focus. Where, in Polanyi’s exposition, do we hear of incarnation? Where do we find an acknowledgement of the God of revelation, or pneumatology? Where does Polanyi explore the authority of Holy

Scripture, the creeds and the confessions of the church? He may touch on such matters in passing, but most of the time they play little or no formative part in his analysis of religion. As I noted in the footnote above, Polanyi appears to subsume Christianity under a generic ‘religion’.

In view of the way in which Polanyi approaches religion it is not surprising that there is a considerable degree of ambiguity about what he held to be true. The form of a debate – such as the one which took place between Harry Prosch and Richard Gelwick – is posited upon an assumption that it is possible to get to the bottom of what Polanyi really thought about the existence of God. However, the little biographical information that is bequeathed to us suggests that even those who were close to him – certainly in the latter part of his life – drew very different conclusions about his personal religious convictions. He was, for whatever reasons, secretive about such beliefs.

In his writings a particular kind of ambiguity arises in that the major ‘tools’ which he deploys in his discussions of religion (‘articulate systems’, ‘indwelling’, the ‘integration of incompatibles’, etc.) appear to ‘work’ on the basis of *either* a realist *or* a non-realist understanding of God. While some specific comments may tell in favour of a realist view, others may suggest a non-realist God. But the great bulk of what he writes appears to be substantially consistent with either view. I contend, therefore, that there is very little evidence available which might settle the debate – certainly if it is cast in the form of a choice between these two alternatives. Maybe this is how Polanyi *intended* to leave the matter.

## **Polanyi’s Own View of the Contribution of his Thought to Religion**

Despite the ambiguity and unevenness which mark his writings on religion, it is apparent that Polanyi sees his own philosophical contribution standing in significant relation to religious practice and theological thought.

Polanyi’s epistemology illuminates the commonalities of the ways in which things are known in science and religion. The triadic structure of knowing, comprising of subsidiary knowledge, focal knowledge and the person, is evident in both spheres of human knowing – as it is in all others. In both cases, knowledge is linked to a participatory indwelling in which both fiduciary and tacit components are intrinsic to its achievement. Thus Polanyi sees one key aspect of his contribution to religious understanding as the identification of particular continuities between religious and scientific knowing.

Also of significance for his understanding of religion is his hierarchical ontology in which religion occupies the highest position. This ontology affirms an essentially meaningful universe, and that meaning is profoundly bound up with the meanings which are established in religion. For Polanyi perhaps *the* key to religion is its affirmation, in its narrative myths, of the meaningfulness of the world and of the place of humanity within it. Such a task is beyond the scope of scientific knowledge: if it is to be established it must be the achievement of religion.

It is also important to note that Polanyi sees religion, in his time, as disempowered; but he entertains the thought that if the distortions of modernity are corrected it may once more emerge as a force. This view is expressed in the last paragraph of *The Tacit Dimension*. Polanyi, reflecting upon humanity’s need for a purpose bearing on eternity, writes, “Perhaps this problem cannot be resolved on secular grounds alone. But

its religious solution should become more feasible once religious faith is released from pressure by an absurd vision of the universe, and so there will open up instead a meaningful world which could resound to religion.” (TD 92) Polanyi sees his own work as a modest ‘paving of the way’, for religion. The theme recurs in *Meaning*. Polanyi concludes his consideration of religion here by commenting, “this present work is not directed toward effecting conversions to any religion. At the most, it is directed toward unstopping our ears so that we may hear the liturgical summons should one ever come our way.” (M 180)

An affirmation of religion is, in Polanyi’s view, an affirmation of religion’s claim that the universe is meaningful. In the light of this he believes that (in an indeterminate and indirect way) he is working in the service of the emancipation of religion. As such it is, perhaps, unsurprising that Polanyi is happy to speak about religion without distinguishing between different religions, and speak, specifically, of the Christian faith while paying scant attention to its traditions of practice and doctrine. R. L. Hall is concerned that the ‘reality’ of religion so conceived is overly aesthetic and insufficiently attuned to its ‘historical’ origins. He writes, “If we are thinking of religion in the historical sense, that is, of the western experience, especially the Judaeo-Christian tradition, then Polanyi’s account of religion simply will not do.”<sup>38</sup> Polanyi, in his comments on religion, falls short of recognising the historical events which Judaism and Christianity, as two pertinent and central examples, regard as pivotal to their own self understanding.<sup>39</sup> Hall continues, “In historical religious encounters, personal relationships of dialogue and revelation replace the poetic anonymity of the aesthetic encounter. Polanyi has not adequately recognized this historical dimension of religious experience. He has, as a consequence, poeticized religion”.<sup>40</sup> Polanyi’s discussion of the theme of meaning – in its relation to religion – is certainly an interesting one but provides another example of how he can offer insightful comments on the theme of religion while failing to grasp issues which are central to its life and self-understanding.

## **A Re-evaluation of Polanyi’s Contribution to Religion**

My evaluation of Polanyi’s writing on religion and theology has, so far, been substantially negative. The heart of my criticism flows from what I think is an essentially Polyanian insight: to make a substantial contribution in a particular sphere of human life it is necessary to participate within a community of practice which corresponds to that sphere. As we have noted, Polanyi was neither a theologian nor an established churchman – even if he did converse with theologians (notably Paul Tillich) and attend Christian worship during periods of his life. Polanyi’s indwelling of the scientific community was a profound one; apart from this he could not have written as he did of the theory of knowledge. But his indwelling of any religious community was by no means of the same order, and it is inevitable that his comments on religion, though not without interest, lack the consistency and penetration that we find in the writings which draw upon the rich veins of his scientific knowledge.

There is a general methodological point to be made here. Any discipline must allow its methods to be formed and to develop in response to the object of its concern.<sup>41</sup> Theology, too, must develop methodologies wherein it is faithful to its object.<sup>42</sup> Karl Barth suggests that “The *only* way which theology has of proving its scientific character is to devote itself to the task of knowledge as determined by its actual theme and thus to show what it means by true science.”<sup>43</sup> As such theology does not forsake its theme by subjugating or correlating it to the concerns of the natural sciences but ascribes the epithet of ‘science’ to theology precisely because it is faithful to its ‘object’ and is so in a rigorous and *a posteriori* way. This is its task and, in my view, it is beyond doubt that Polanyi’s work provides invaluable tools for theologians who are engaged in such a task.

Polanyi's best insights are established in relation to the concerns of the scientific community, but part of what they do is to illuminate philosophical distortions deeply rooted in the contours of western thought. But such distortions, which blighted the work of the philosophers of science, do not cease to have force at the doors of the church or the desk of the theologian. Polanyi may not have been well placed to establish the significance of his epistemological insights in theology and religion but, as I have already noted, there is considerable potential in such an undertaking.

In bringing this article to a conclusion I do not want to make some general remarks about how theologians might appropriately commandeer Polanyi's insights into the maladies of modernism and his prescribed remedies, but to make a strong affirmation of one of the themes in his writing on religion: his discussion of Christian worship. I do not want to explore it in detail, as it suffers, in many respects, from the kinds problems that I have already noted. But it also contains an insight in which he makes a profound connexion between the theory of knowledge, as he developed it, the religious life, and theology, as a second order reflection upon it.

In *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi draws a clear and important distinction between the 'logical rules' of science and the 'scientific outlook'. The former offers what Polanyi calls a 'highly attenuated summary' of the latter.<sup>44</sup> Conceived in this way it is clear that "science is not established by the acceptance of a formula, but is part of our mental life, shared out for cultivation among many thousands of specialized scientists throughout the world, and shared receptively, at second-hand, by many millions. And we shall realize that any sincere account of the reasons for which we too share in this mental life must necessarily be given as part of this life." (PK 171)

To *become* a scientist one must be nurtured within this outlook or tradition: one must entrust oneself to it. To *participate* in the life of science one must continue to *trust* in this outlook in which one has been nurtured. Scientific discovery will, inevitably, challenge this outlook, but it will do so in respect of a specific aspect of it, and never will it challenge the tradition in a *general* way. One learns to be a scientist and one practices as a scientist on the basis of a *belief* in the scientific outlook, as this has been established within the scientific community. Polanyi commends a return to the insights of St Augustine who "taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis*." (PK 266)<sup>45</sup> Our knowledge is possible because of commitments and beliefs which can be neither fully articulated, nor fully defended.

While it is clear that there are some distinctions to be made, the significance of this insight has important consequences for religion and theology. If the articulate expressions of scientific knowledge are rooted in participation within the scientific community, the theological and dogmatic expressions of the church must be understood as rooted in the forms of life in which the church participates. This is an insight which has been significantly underplayed in modern Protestant theology, influenced as it has been by many of the strands of Enlightenment thought with which Polanyi contended. As such it has been weak in acknowledging the link between the life-practice of faith communities and theological 'systems'. But it is an insight which Polanyi does establish in his specific comments on religion. Part of his treatment of religion in *Personal Knowledge* – despite the many shortcomings which attend it – is a description of the religious life conceived as 'knowledge through participation'. He puts considerable emphasis upon the components of worship showing that it is not our focal knowledge of these which is of primary importance, but our indwelling of them. It is through such an indwelling

that the religious vision emerges. “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.” (PK 281)

There is also something of a puzzle here. In speaking of religious indwelling Polanyi points to the *particular* practices which comprise the believer’s participation in the religious community. However awkward his descriptions may be, he attempts to tie ‘religious indwelling’ to particular religious practices (which he describes in some detail). Despite his own greater familiarity with the life of science, Polanyi is, in certain respects, less explicit in his description of the life of science in terms of *particular* practices. For example, in his work we find very little about what it is like to work in a scientific laboratory, despite the wealth of experience he had working in such an environment, and the importance of that work in his scientific career. I do not wish to speculate about this here,<sup>46</sup> but I do want to suggest that Polanyi’s intuition to pay attention to the components of religious practice as providing the subsidiary clues for religious understanding is a profound and important one.<sup>47</sup>

Theology – and Protestant theology in particular – has much to learn from this. Too much theology – even in our supposedly ‘post-modern’ context – retains a strong rationalistic strand in that what is expressed within it is inadequately ‘rooted’ in the forms of life out of which it must necessarily emerge. The ideas and ‘systems’ which it expresses fly too free of the *realities* which they claim to articulate – rooted as they are – *and must be* – in human life. The task of theology is not, as Barth noted, to “give orders in the church”.<sup>48</sup> The task of theology is firstly to *acknowledge* what is known in the church, through its life and practice, and to *serve* the church in seeking to articulate this in the language and concepts of the contemporary world. Thus its task is not to tell the church what it must believe, but to ‘purify the dialect of the tribe’.<sup>49</sup> In developing its vocation along these lines there is still much to be learned from Polanyi’s understanding of indwelling and the importance of tacit knowledge – rooted in communities of practice – and, indeed, some of his explicit comments on religion.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Polanyi tends to subsume 'Christianity' under a generic 'religion' (despite his assertion in *Meaning* that there can be no religion "in general" (*M* 179). Most of his comments on religion relate to Christianity but, somewhat problematically, he does not clearly differentiate the two designations. In this article my concerns will focus on Christian theology and the church without, in any way, denying the significance of this line of inquiry for other religious traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Martin X. Moleski, *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000). p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Other Polanyi scholars have debated such issues. See Terence Kennedy, *The Morality of Knowledge: Transcendence and the Intellectual Life in the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Rome: Pontifica Universitas Lateranensis, 1979). pp. 139-144; Andy F. Sanders, *Michael Polanyi's Post-Critical Epistemology: A Reconstruction of Some Aspects of "Tacit Knowing"* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988). pp. 227-264; William T. Scott, "The Question of a Religious Reality," *Zygon* 17 (1982). pp. 83-87.; R. T. Allen, *Transcendence and Immanence in the Philosophy of Michael Polanyi and Christian Theism* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press for Rutherford House/Edinburgh, 1992). pp. 31-74; and Drusilla Scott, *Michael Polanyi* (London: SPCK, 1996). pp. 180-199.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gelwick, *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> See Harry Prosch, "Review of *the Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi*. By Richard Gelwick," *Ethics* 89 (1978/9).

<sup>6</sup> Polanyi lists 'mathematics, religion and the various arts'. See *PK* p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Prosch. p. 213 Prosch's emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 214 Prosch's emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Prosch is drawing here on the distinction which Polanyi makes in *PK* p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> Prosch. p. 214 Prosch's emphasis.

- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.214 Prosch's emphasis. One wonders in what sense something could be 'discovered' on these terms.
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Gelwick, "Science and Reality, Religion and God: A Reply to Harry Prosch [*Ethics* 89: Pp 211-216, January 1979; Rejoinder.]," *Zygon* 17 (1982). p. 26.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Although one wonders how this might be so in the case of mathematics, for example.
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Gelwick, "Science and Reality, Religion and God: A Reply to Harry Prosch," *Zygon* 17 (1982). p. 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 34.
- <sup>17</sup> Harry Prosch, "Polanyi's View of Religion in *Personal Knowledge: A Response to Richard Gelwick*," *Zygon* 17 (1982).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 41.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 41.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 42.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 45f. Prosch's emphasis.
- <sup>22</sup> Unless we take this to be a discussion of 'logical possibilities' in a frame of reference which he actually rejects – which would seem to be an extremely convoluted interpretation.
- <sup>23</sup> Prosch, "Polanyi's View of Religion in *Personal Knowledge: A Response to Richard Gelwick*." p. 46.
- <sup>24</sup> Colin Weightman, "Polanyi and Mathematics, Torrance and Philosophy of Science: A Response to Apczynski's Review," *Tradition and Discovery* 24, no. 1 (1997-98). p. 35 Weightman's emphasis.
- <sup>25</sup> Both reflecting upon Polanyi when he was living in Oxford in his 70s.
- <sup>26</sup> T. F. Torrance, "Michael Polanyi and the Christian Faith - a Personal Report," *Tradition and Discovery* 27:2 (2000-2001).p. 28.
- <sup>27</sup> Prosch, "Polanyi's View of Religion in *Personal Knowledge: A Response to Richard Gelwick*." pp. 46f.
- <sup>28</sup> See *PK* pp. 195-202 and *M* pp. 148-181. See, also, Michael Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961). (subsequently re-published in Michael Polanyi, *Scientific Thought and Social Reality: Essays* (New York: International Universities Press, 1974)., and Michael Polanyi, "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?," *Philosophy Today* 7 (1963).
- <sup>29</sup> Much of the material in chapter 10 of *Meaning* is not to be found in the lecture manuscript (Texas and Chicago series, 1969) also entitled "Acceptance of Religion" on which the chapter was based. [See "Polanyi Collection: Regenstein Library, University of Chicago." Box 40, Folder 1] I am unaware of similar material in any of Polanyi's published or unpublished work. It is striking that Polanyi's lecture manuscript contains only six paragraphs at the end of the piece which deal directly with religious matters. In *Meaning*, however, we find a large amount of material about the Holy Communion, praise, prayer, ritual and worship. It seems reasonable to surmise that this material is attributable to Prosch's hand.
- <sup>30</sup> In addition to the question of authorship, it is appropriate to recognise that *Personal Knowledge* was written at the height of Polanyi's powers, while *Meaning* was conceived at a time when Polanyi was struggling with problems of memory loss and difficulties with concentration.
- <sup>31</sup> For a work of commentary on this theme as it is expressed in *Personal Knowledge* see Phil Mullins, "Religious Meaning in Polanyi's Personal Knowledge," *Polanyiana: The Periodical of the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association* 2:4 (1992).
- <sup>32</sup> Polanyi's concentration upon science is indicated at the outset in the preface to *Personal Knowledge*: "This is primarily an enquiry into the nature and justification of scientific knowledge. But my

reconsideration of scientific knowledge leads on to a wide range of questions outside science.” (PK vii)

<sup>33</sup> The significance of Polanyi’s profound participation in science in establishing a new theory of knowledge was noted by his collaborator, Marjorie Grene: “[H]e came to the problem, raised it and grappled with it from within the life of science. It was knowledge in the concrete context of existence, the existence of science and scientists, that he was concerned to vindicate. What resulted was often obscure, sometimes mistaken, and couched in a rhetoric that most professional philosophers find hard to tolerate; but it was a philosophy rooted in reality, neither the clever gymnastics of analysis, nor the prophylactic debate of a philosophy of science based on a grave misconception of, and almost entirely out of contact with its alleged subject matter.” Marjorie Grene, “Tacit Knowing: Grounds for a Revolution in Philosophy,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 8, no. 3 (1977). pp. 166f.

<sup>34</sup> See PK pp. 195-202.

<sup>35</sup> See PK pp. 279-286.

<sup>36</sup> In his latter writing, especially in *Meaning*, certain forms of schematisation are drawn from his comparatively brief (though by no means insignificant) engagement with the study of metaphor, art and myth.

<sup>37</sup> This comes out with particular force in Polanyi, “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?.”

<sup>38</sup> Ronald L. Hall, “Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion,” *Zygon* 17 (1982). p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Nor is the pneumatological aspect of such knowledge taken into account by Polanyi.

<sup>40</sup> Hall. p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> This is perspicuously absent in Polanyi’s approach to religion.

<sup>42</sup> In Gelwick’s terminology: “the *logos* of the Christian revelation.” Gelwick, “Science and Reality, Religion and God: A Reply to Harry Prosch [Ethics 89: pp. 211-216, January 1979; Rejoinder.]” p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God I.1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 2nd ed., *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975). p. 10. My emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> I would question whether ‘summary’ is an appropriate word in this context. What Polanyi is wanting to say is that what can be articulated by the scientist – in terms of theories, formulae, descriptions, and the like – is dependent upon a much broader knowledge (substantially tacit) which is established through the scientist’s participation within the scientific community. What is articulated is not a ‘summary’ of all that is known.

<sup>45</sup> In this instance Polanyi commandeers the language of the church in the service of scientific knowledge.

<sup>46</sup> Although I do think that the observation merits further reflection.

<sup>47</sup> Notwithstanding all the difficulties which attend the language he uses in order to make this point.

<sup>48</sup> Barth. p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> I have concerned myself with the Christian church, but, as I have already implied, it is clear that something similar might be said in relation to other faith communities.

## 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. Because the journal serves English writers across the world, we do not require anybody’s “standard English.” 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. Consistency and clear writing are expected.

Manuscripts normally will be sent out for blind review. Authors are expected to provide an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment.

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