

The Man Who Fell Among Theologians

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ABSTRACT Key words: Polanyi biography; Polanyi's concept of God and Christianity; Polanyi's experience of depression; theological epistemology; heuristic philosophy of religion; moral inversion; conviviality; atheism; intelligent design; tolerance; Protestantism; Enlightenment; freedom of inquiry; fiduciary structure of commitment.

Polanyi's philosophy of science is appealing to theologians because it shows that all acts of commitment to comprehensive interpretative frameworks are similar in fiduciary structure even though their content and focus may be quite different. The recent biography of Polanyi was co-authored by a scientist and a theologian whose different fields of expertise helped them appreciate the full scope of Polanyi's career. Polanyi's commitment to Christianity cannot be neatly categorized. As a large-hearted, open-minded, convivial thinker, he affirmed the Protestant and Enlightenment tradition of responsible, conscientious inquiry in all fields, from physics to religion. Polanyi hoped that a renewed understanding of the tacit and personal dimension of knowing might act as an antidote to the nihilistic philosophies that led to the destruction of Europe in the world wars.

The only interest in Polanyi in Great Britain (and I suspect in the U.S.A. as well) is among those who see him as offering a way back in for religious knowledge as co-equal with scientific knowledge. This amounts, in my opinion, to a perversion of Polanyi's view. For emotional and aesthetic reasons he would love to have been able to equate the two but rationally he could not. The consequence has been that scientists, to whom Polanyi has matter of great significance to impart, regard him as a wild man, a mystic, against whom science must be protected. It is a tragedy for Polanyi's reputation and for the theory of science—he was a good man fallen among theologians!¹

As a Roman Catholic, I am conditioned to begin a communion service by confessing my faults. When I first read Norman Wetherick's lament over Polanyi unhappy alliance with theologians, I said to myself, "*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!*" My interest in developing a proof for the existence of God is what led to my first contact with Polanyi's work. I showed a version of my proof to Alan Weinblatt, my academic advisor and later director of my B.A. honors thesis; he replied, "You must read *Personal Knowledge*." I am not a disinterested inquirer. My interest in epistemology has always been shaded and influenced by my theological standpoint. I am not just interested in how we know what we know. I want to understand how we know what we know about God.

By the time I found Wetherick's complaint in Bill Scott's files, I was already well along with the revision of the biography. I had also already met Wetherick in person and spent an enchanting afternoon with him and his wife at their flat in Edinburgh. Neither his atheism nor my theism kept us from enjoying lunch together and ruminating on Polanyi's philosophy. Those who do not know Wetherick should strive to hear the chuckle in his voice and recognize the gentle humor in his jibe.

If either Polanyi or Scott could have been consulted, I doubt that either would have thought that a dogmatic Roman Catholic theologian would be a good choice to revise the biography. My primary qualifications were that I had enough time at the right time (1997-1998) because of a major sabbatical from teaching and that I had enough confidence in my skills as a reader and writer to think that perhaps I could be of service to Polanyians by producing an abridged version of Scott's work. It was not until Phil Mullins questioned me about my training in science after the book appeared that I realized that I, like Polanyi himself, was a "border crosser" (Tyson, 22).² My scientific credentials are (as some scientists are wont to say) "not much different from zero." In high school, I did very well in freshman biology and was given a stack of college textbooks to read on evolution by my teacher. I was in science honors for the next two years, but dropped out of the fourth-year course to concentrate on an Advanced Placement tutorial in calculus. My last science course, of a sort, was "Techno-Scientific Perspectives on Man and His Environment" in my first year of college. I disagreed with my teacher's view of scientific method and remember vividly the disappointment I felt about the grade on my final paper and for the course.

Phil Mullins is right about the difficulties I faced in understanding Scott's overview of Polanyi's scientific career (Mullins, 10). I did the first reorganization and abridgement of Scott's manuscript while living at Campion Hall in Oxford. I went to the Radcliffe Science Library regularly to consult encyclopedias, text books, histories of science, and journals. My immersion in the world of science led to an epiphany one day on my walk from Campion to Radcliffe: I saw in a flash how the universe must look to those who are persuaded (for whatever reason) that there is no God. From that standpoint, the only logical conclusion is that all life and intelligence happened simply by chance. This was a year before the controversy about the Polanyi Center and the arguments about complexity and Intelligent Design. For committed atheists, there is no calculation of improbability that can shake their view that strange and improbable things do happen, no matter how long the odds may be against the event. For them, our existence here today is a tribute to the power of random mutations preserved by natural selection. In the idiom of Douglas N. Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the entire universe is an infinite improbability machine.

The primary reason I wanted to read Bill Scott's biography of Polanyi was to find out where he stood on the conflict between theists and atheists. On December 1, 1941, Polanyi returned a book to Professor Willis Jackson in the Department of Electro-Technics at Manchester with the comment, "I do not think the author has been fortunate in stating his faith in God as something capable of complete endorsement by reasoned argument. However, that ambition may be too high for any mortal brain."³ Twenty-five years later, Polanyi mused in an unpublished fragment that "We must love him so that he may exist, not love him because he exist[s]. He can be loved but not observed."⁴ Perhaps this should be called Polanyi's Theological Uncertainty Principle. God meant a great deal to him. As Gelwick shows so well, "Religion as spiritual and intellectual concern for the human condition and its aspirations are at the heart of Polanyi's work. The basic framework of Jewish and Christian thought that takes the course of history as revealing both human greatness and frailty and also the need for human dedication to good over evil and love over hate is present in all his work" (Gelwick, 30).

There is, then, no simple religious category into which Polanyi may be slotted. He was quietly, privately, determinedly non-credal. In a sense, he was non-denominational long before the non-denominational movement began. No particular version of Christianity won his heart. Phil Mullins recently called my attention to "The English and the Continent," an essay written in 1943, which led to Polanyi's involvement in the Moot.⁴ In this essay, Polanyi praises the Protestant foundation of English culture:

Tolerance in England was a religious doctrine, a doctrine for the protection of the joint religious interests of all Protestant sects. It was established as a safeguard against the

Government, against Catholicism, and against Atheism. ... Tolerance, being originally a rule of religious enquiry, excluded Catholics, because the Catholic Church denied freedom to such an enquiry, and it excluded also atheists because they refused to accept the starting point, the heuristic principle, underlying the enquiry (373).

For Polanyi, the Protestant faith rests on “the conception of individual responsibility” (375). He embodied this principle in his own spiritual life, taking responsibility for his concept of God and for the moral implications that flowed from it. He saw the religious foundation of English and European civilization, and wanted to strengthen it through his philosophy of freedom and responsibility: “Nothing will grow from moral unbelief. The bolder our plans for the future, the deeper must they be rooted in the original ideas of our civilization” (381). In his own unique and personal way, he intended to ally himself with “the English attempt to carry on the great Reformation into the modern scientific age” (381).

I am, by birth, taste, temperament, and personal commitment, profoundly sympathetic to Lee Congdon’s assertion that “Spiritual pilgrims cannot be content with the assurance that Christianity, understood as a set of profound myths, is existentially meaningful; they want to know whether or not it witnesses to the truth, or rather The Truth” (Congdon, 13). I believe that Christianity claims to have knowledge of God that can be found nowhere else except by accepting the testimony of the apostles about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. But I think it is wrong to excommunicate Polanyi from the assembly of “spiritual pilgrims.” He consciously and consistently identified himself with Christianity even when he, his sister, her husband, and other friends and family members had suffered on account of their Jewish heritage. I am also not sure that Polanyi’s lifelong struggles with depression were specifically related to his inability to accept “the dogmas of historic Christianity” (Congdon, 14). At times, his unhappiness may have been related to a sense of being on the outside of a great Christian feast which he found himself unable to join, but the genesis of his sorrows is more likely to be rooted in the loss of his father early in life and his lifelong struggles with his mother’s turbulent personality.

I think Gelwick’s appraisal of Polanyi’s philosophy of religion is closer to the mark. For the most part, Polanyi was at peace with his own understanding of and commitment to Christianity as a springboard for “economic, social, and political reform” (Gelwick, 31). Gelwick makes an important distinction between Polanyi’s interest in the common structure of all acts of faith by which we make any commitment to any comprehensive interpretative framework (“the faith by which one believes”) and the content of the faith established by that framework (“the faith that is believed”; [Gelwick, 31]). This is where I take issue with Wetherick’s portrait of how theologians use (or misuse) Polanyi. Wetherick understands theologians as “those who see him as offering a way back in for religious knowledge as co-equal with scientific knowledge.” Gelwick makes a much more subtle point and one with which I think Polanyi would agree: religion and science are alike in the fundamental act of trust that each require (Gelwick, 31-32), but they are not and cannot be “co-equal” because the specific claims of religious and scientific faith are about radically different kinds of realities. Polanyi held that “God cannot be observed” (PK, 279); if God could be observed using scientific techniques, He would not be God but merely a part of the universe. I think that for Polanyi, this would be a permanent boundary for his heuristic philosophy of religion. Polanyi had the instincts of a mystic if not the experiences of a mystic. For him, God must always be greater than anything we can say about Him.

Roberts claims that Polanyi’s religious stance led to being offered the Tillich chair at Harvard (Roberts, 17). I found nothing on this in reading the files at the Regenstein nor in doing a quick review of Scott’s files for this essay. The offer must have been made *viva voce* or in some form that has not otherwise been preserved.

It is not the kind of fact that either Scott or I would have suppressed if we had known about it. Tillich moved from Harvard to the University of Chicago in 1962. In October of 1962, Polanyi gave the Terry Lectures at Yale. He met Tillich in February of 1963.⁶ It is possible that someone suggested Polanyi should throw his hat in the ring for the Harvard chair, based on the success of the Gifford Lectures and *Personal Knowledge*, and that Polanyi mentioned this idea to Roberts as if a definite offer had been made.

I very much appreciate Roberts' criticism that the last part of the biography does not give enough weight to Polanyi's recognition of "moral inversion" as the key to a correct understanding of Europe's self-destruction in the two world wars:

The last 55 pages of the biography, which covers the period that corresponds with my time with Michael, passes too lightly over Michael's concept of moral inversion. This concept was important to his thought and was a subject to which he intended to return. ... Moral inversion was at the core of Michael's understanding of the violence of the 20th century. He hoped to explain, in insightful outline, 20th century history in terms of moral inversion. (Roberts, 13)

That this was to be the major theme of Polanyi's proposed final synthesis sounds right. Polanyi tried to enlist the help of Grene, Gelwick, Poteat, Roberts and others to pull this material together (Scott and Moleski, 274-275, 281-282, 285). None of the three letters from Polanyi to Roberts in Scott's files (February 12, 1968; April 2, 1968; June 6, 1968) contain the phrase "moral inversion," but it is clear that it is the right way to epitomize Polanyi's goal of giving "a historical account of the intellectual process leading from the original ideas of the Soviet Revolution and its original conflict with Western thought to their present policies" (February 12, 1968). Polanyi's turn to philosophy came from and was sustained by his belief that ideas matter. If an "intellectual process" could wreak such havoc, it might be hoped that a reform of the intellect might bring equally great blessings. Polanyi wrote Gelwick in February 8, 1964 (in Scott's file):

I was very pleased to read your beautifully formulated account of my ideas in your paper delivered on the occasion of your call. The parallelism with Luther being merely structural, I have no objection to it. I think it does illustrate a dead-end similar to that of the Roman Church in 1500 (see Machiavelli!) and it is not extravagant to suggest that modern [revisionism], of which I form part, strives to recover the innocence of the 18th Century Enlightenment, much as the Reform strove to recover the purity of biblical faith, as rooted in the individual conscience.

It seems clear that to the end of his days, Polanyi strove to rehabilitate the conscience of the West through his philosophy of personal knowledge.

Roberts also suggests that the biography should have "a section on Polanyi's epistemology, contrasting it with other approaches, and explaining how Polanyi's explanation of the nature of knowledge came from his experience seeking truth as a physical scientist" (Roberts, 18). I deliberately chose not to include such analyses in the biography for a number of reasons. I believe that the material for such an overview is in the biography itself. I strove to highlight such connections very briefly where it was clear that something Polanyi learned in the laboratory foreshadowed his later philosophy of science. The book is unevenly weighted toward a discussion of Polanyi's scientific career in part because that is the material that Scott wrote about the most and in part because I thought that it would be the most difficult for humanists to find on their own. Polanyi's philosophy, theology, and aesthetics are relatively well-known and speak for themselves in a way that his scientific writing does not (at least for a non-scientific audience). I made extensive cuts in Scott's summaries

of Polanyi's philosophical writings because I think the originals are better than any commentary he or I could produce. It seems to me that the place for such re-mappings and assessments of Polanyi's contributions is in non-biographical essays or books.

This is one of the decisions that I imagine Scott would object to most strenuously. In his manuscript, he took a thematic approach and tried to consolidate and evaluate all of Polanyi's contributions in each area where he made substantial contributions: the potential theory of adsorption; crystallography; reaction kinetics; economics; social studies; philosophy and epistemology; theology; and aesthetics. One of the readers for Oxford University Press recommended a study of Polanyi's influence in the field of the social sciences and especially in the sociology of knowledge. If he had had the health and vitality, I'm sure Scott would have gladly added that section to the book. In my imaginary argument with Scott over the correct design for the book, I won only because he was incapacitated and could not insist on keeping his original design. After editing his manuscript to make it uniform, I cut it to pieces, reassembled it in relatively strict chronological order, and left out most of his efforts to determine how great an impact Polanyi had in each of these areas. My goal was to tell Polanyi's life story more or less as it happened, with a multitude of different ideas incubating or bearing fruit all through his life. Determining Polanyi's significance on the world stage is for other venues.

I was very pleasantly surprised at the theme Ruel Tyson found in the biography. There is no doubt that Polanyi was a master of "the art of conversation" (Tyson, 19) and that he "embodied in his person many of the salient features of his concept of conviviality" (Tyson, 21). When I read the archives at the Regenstein, I was impressed over and over again at the breadth of Polanyi's correspondence and social contacts. It is clear from many accounts that Polanyi was a charming man in person and that he had a gift of paying attention to people that set them at ease and filled them with delight. Tyson, like Roberts, adds a detail that Scott and I would certainly have included if we had heard of it sooner—the story of the young Polanyi hiding within earshot of his mother's soirees. Polanyi loved to listen to people and he loved being listened to. I hope that the biography will let the conversations continue for many years to come.

Endnotes

¹Norman E. Wetherick to William T. Scott, August 6, 1987. References to other materials in William T. Scott's files are simply identified in the context of the discussion.

²This and subsequent references to essays in this issue of *Tradition and Discovery* are noted in parenthesis by the author's name and the page number.

³Polanyi to Jackson, December 1, 1941, Box 4, Folder 7 in The Papers of Michael Polanyi held by the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library. This quotation is used with permission of the University of Chicago Library.

⁴William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S. J., *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 263. Subsequent citations use Scott and Moleski and page number and, when the context is clear, citations are by page numbers only in parentheses in the text.

⁵"The English and the Continent." *The Political Quarterly* 14 (October-December, 1943): 372-381. Quotations from this essay in this paragraph are simply noted in parenthesis.

⁶See *TAD* 22:1 (1995-1996), a special issue devoted to the Polanyi-Tillich meeting.