

A Response To The Papers of Robert John Russell, Durwood Foster and Richard Gelwick

Donald Musser

ABSTRACT Key Words: epistemology , heteronomy, method, ontology, participation, republic of science, theology and science, Paul Tillich, Michael Polanyi, Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, Ian Barbour.

This essay is a brief response to Durwood Foster and Richard Gelwick's essays analyzing the 1963 encounter of Paul Tillich and Michael Polanyi and to Robert Russell's assessment of the importance of Polanyi's ideas for recent theology and science discussions.

Since about 1975 I have been a member of both the North American Paul Tillich Society and the Michael Polanyi Society. A dues paying member, most years. Like a non-resident church member, one who attends society meetings sporadically. Seldom have I been more eager to attend and to participate as a respondent than in this unique joint session. When Walt Gulick invited me, I did not have to reflect on the challenge of taking on another new and unplanned task; rather, I immediately consented.

A bit of autobiography will help you understand why. In the mid-1970s, at the age of thirty-two, my wife and I packed up our four-year old daughter, our seven-year-old dog, and drove our aging Ford Torino from a pleasant pastorium in Pittsburgh to a small apartment in a three-story walk-up in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. For the next seven years I spent my intellectual life indwelling the writings of Michael Polanyi and Paul Tillich.

On the one hand, I read Tillich with University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey, one of Tillich's Union Seminary students. On the other hand, I became a mentee to the Lutheran first-name in science and theology, Philip Hefner of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, as well as a young associate of Ralph Wendell Burhoe, future Templeton Award winner and co-editor with Hefner of *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion*.

During those idyllic years, I wrote seminar papers and a doctoral thesis on the implications of Michael Polanyi's epistemology for theology. Through courses with Gilkey and as a teaching assistant to Hefner and Joseph Sittler, and with a dash of spice from Carl Braaten who introduced me to the influence of Martin Kähler on Tillich, I also imbibed the ontological world of Paulus, often with an Old Style in hand.

At the time, I was not focally aware that I was being prepared for a thirty-year career as a teacher, researcher, and author who frequently, even always, was indwelling the insights of the two luminaries we engage today. This short trip through my life provides, then, the reasons I am so pleased to be a part of this convivial gathering.

My deep appreciation goes to our convener, Walter Gulick, who in a *kairotic* moment asked me to be a respondent, which, unknown to him at the time, even tacitly, led me to an ecstatic revelation about my intellectual identity, after all these years. I confess this truth today, publicly, for the first time: *Ich bin ein Tillanyian!* Walt,

thank you for catalyzing my way to this discovery of my true being. I have accepted my acceptance as a Tillanyian.

I now turn to my responses. First, I want to attend briefly to Robert John Russell's fine presentation of the influence of Polanyi on a number of theologians, most who are vitally engaged in the conversation between science and theology. I suggest that a fruitful way of engaging Polanyi and theology would involve asking variations of the question: How is Polanyi's thought used in theology? One way to pursue an answer might be a comparative study of the way Polanyi is brought into theological discourse. I think, for example, that a comparison of the use of Polanyi between, say, a Barthian like T. F. Torrance, with a theologian like myself or Richard Gelwick who finds Tillich's method and epistemology commensurate with Polanyi would be worth undertaking.¹

Second, let me turn to Durwood Foster's fascinating reflections on the Polanyi-Tillich conversation and subsequent interchanges of 1963. Foster's fascinating piece is refreshing, vivid, erudite, emotive, and bold! Foster, for example, states: "Paul Tillich knows nothing about Michael Polanyi." And, he refers to their conversation as "a reciprocal fizzle." And, further, he complains that Polanyi's thought has been "shamefully ignored" by philosophers. He also avers that a subtle prejudice obtained against the Jewish Polanyi because of his baptism as a Roman Catholic. Foster's style in his essay embodies the "genes" of "personal knowledge" in his dialogical treatment of our duo.

I concur with Foster that Polanyi was amiss to conclude in his essay, "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?,"² that Tillich sees science and theology as independent of one another. Although Tillich says as much in *Dynamics of Faith*, Tillich has a much richer position, as his background paper for this session shows clearly.³ Based upon that essay and Parts Four and Five of his *Systematic Theology*, among others, I am quite certain that Tillich would today embrace what Ian Barbour terms the attitude of "dialogue" and even "integration" with regard to science and theology.⁴

Despite our disappointment that the "uncoordinated duo"⁵ did not seriously engage one another in the 1960s, our session today could, and I hope it does, bring them into conversation as we continue to think through their works.

Third, Richard Gelwick's paper refreshes our memories about the context and content of the Tillich-Polanyi nexus. Even more importantly for the theologian, Gelwick enunciates and supports four theses that, taken together, beg for the intellectual engagement of the two thinkers, the philosopher-theologian Tillich and the scientist-philosopher Polanyi. Although I believe they can be brought into fruitful dialogue on numerous topics, let me suggest one. Theologians, like natural scientists, belong to professional groups who authorize, or do not authorize, the results and conclusions of their research. If, I suggest, theologians became acquainted with Polanyi's delineation of what he calls "the republic of science," and applied ideas from the dynamic structures of scientific investigation, they would find an attractive parallel in Tillich's notion of the "participation" of the theologian in the knowing process.

I am not quite convinced of Gelwick's claim about the import of the "Christian" context of the 1963 encounter of the two. He strongly affirms Polanyi's commitment to the Christian faith. In my reading of Polanyi I do not find him seriously confessional with regard to faith. And, even if he considered himself a Christian, I find little solace in that as a theologian. Whether a Christian or not, Polanyi's thought, especially his epistemology, bears our attention as it is as an important resource for our thinking.

Finally, picking up on Gelwick's other emphasis when he references the "context" of their meeting in February in California in 1963, I would like to urge that our two thinkers are as contemporary as ever in the troubled "context" of our world today. The issues that confront the planet, the human race, and all living creatures can be illumined through their multifaceted writings. Attention, for example, to the contemporary "moral inversion" of truth (a Polanyian topic) and the "heteronomy" of thought (a Tillichean notion) is sorely needed to combat unbridled authoritarianism, selfish ambition, and vacuous claims to certainty, from both the "right" and the "left."

Lest I turn this podium into a pulpit, and since my time has elapsed, let me close by citing some concluding remarks in an essay I wrote in a 1986 essay that was based upon an oral presentation I made at a conference at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, on the centennial of Tillich's birth. I said that Tillich's view of reason has the structural framework to buttress an ontology and an epistemology that are dynamic and not static, subject to rational assessment, and personal (or participative). With the following words I then concluded that Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge is a promising candidate: "Polanyi . . . developed an epistemology and a correlative ontology (a stratified universe) that provide the beginnings for a constructive philosophy that awaits development and application to theology."⁶

Endnotes

¹ See my essay "Theological Reasoning: A Tillichean Perspective," *Soundings* LXIX (Winter, 1986): pp. 423-435.

² In *Philosophy Today* 7 (Spring, 1963): pp. 4-14.

³ "Participation and Knowledge: Problems of an Ontology of Cognition," *Main Works / Hauptwerke*, Vol 1/Bd 1: Philosophical Writings / Philosophische Schriften; Ed. by Wenz, Gunther. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1989, pp. 382-389.

⁴ See Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, pp. 36-38.

⁵ Foster's term for them.

⁶ Musser, "Theological Reasoning," pp. 433-434.

Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join. If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Doug Masini (masini@etsu.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list.