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## Commentary

THE QUESTION OF A RELIGIOUS REALITY:  
COMMENTARY ON THE POLANYI PAPERS

by William T. Scott

*Abstract.* Two aspects of the problem of interpreting Michael Polanyi's outlook on religion are discussed. First, various ways of relating to reality beyond the objective perception of factuality must be considered, including the shift from I-It to I-Thou relations, and the self-giving mode of surrender to a symbolized reality. Second, the active use of the imagination in perception involves a commitment that the image is of something real, transcending the person. I believe that Polanyi understands both religious rituals and works of art to point to realities that can be met again in new ways. After this discussion reasons for Polanyi's reticence to speak about his own religion are suggested and, finally, some known facts about his personal religion are given.

The preceding papers call to our attention some fundamental questions about truth in scientific, artistic, and religious experience. They also bring to light some serious difficulties in interpreting Michael Polanyi's views on these subjects and raise problems concerning Polanyi's own inconsistencies and failures to articulate clearly what he intended.

The principal question at issue in regard to Polanyi's outlook on religion is whether he considered religious experience and ritual to have ontological reference. The question is well argued in these papers, and I can only suggest two points which should be examined in relation to the controversy.

In the first place, there are other ways of relating to reality than the objective perception of factuality that involves a substantial separation of the knower from the known. In *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi describes William T. Scott is professor emeritus of physics, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada 89557.

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scribes the shift from I-I1 to I-*Thou* relations as we move from consideration of the inanimate objects of physics up through the hierarchy of complexity to animals and to persons.<sup>1</sup> We thus move from observation to meeting, a distinction which Martin Buber insists is complete.<sup>2</sup> Another way is the self-giving mode in relation to symbols and works of art, which Polanyi describes as the surrender of the person to the reality symbolized.<sup>3</sup> However, surrender applies to all beliefs. In an unpublished paper "Forms of Atheism" written for The Moot in 1948, Polanyi says "my beliefs are surrenders, accepted to avoid further delay which I believe unjustifiable. . . . I cannot hope that they carry report of more than one aspect of reality and would fully expect that this may appear flatly to contradict other true reports on different aspects."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to refer to religious beliefs in this vein.

Surrender and encounter as forms of relation to reality are expressed in the claims that God is to be known in worshipping him and in loving him, but not in observing him.<sup>5</sup> Polanyi declares in the essay just mentioned "Indeed I often wonder whether a consistent application of the doctrine of Encounter might not reduce all references to God that are not addresses in the form of prayer to the secondary status of crude statements."<sup>6</sup>

All the various ways in which a person relates to reality are for Polanyi subsumed under the conception of dwelling in the subsidiary pointers to focal, external entities.<sup>7</sup> The ontology implied in indwelling is that the boundary between the person and the world shifts so that the person takes in, or alternatively submerges into, elements of external reality. The word "external" becomes in fact ambiguous, but the externality remains for that is the universal pole of the commitment that is made.

The debate over the terms "verification" and "validation" concerns differences in relations to reality, and it must be carried on with full awareness of the crucial sentence of *Personal Knowledge*: "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>8</sup>

My second point is that the active and creative use of imagination in perception or in works of art aims at an image to which the person makes a commitment as an image of something there, a transcendent reality.<sup>9</sup> It is the combination of subjective desire and use of imagination with universal intent and commitment to a perceived reality that constitutes for Polanyi the personal element in knowing. There is no problem with this in respect to the so-called "natural" integrations, for which the assertions made concern the external content only and suppress the individual's subjectivity. The problem arises for a

"transnatural" integration in which the artistic frame or other subjectively created artifact is united with the incompatible vision of the reality being represented.<sup>10</sup> The important questions are: Does a fictional scene in a work of art point to a genuinely universal personal meaning that in some sense was discovered rather than invented and can be met again in unanticipated ways? Does the transnatural integration in a religious ritual correspondingly point to a transcendent, divine reality? I believe that Polanyi intends the answer yes to both questions. Whether he intended a distinction between the realities pointed to in a work of art and in religious worship is not so clear to me. Clearly he claims that only by entering into the union of incompatibles in religious liturgy or prayer could one be able to enter into an awareness of the divine reality, and clearly he claims especially that the incompatibles integrated include the person surrendering in prayer or other encounter.<sup>11</sup> Whether the divine reality is to be called "supernatural" or not is a matter of the meaning attached to the word "natural" and seems to me to have nothing to do with the "transnatural" character of human creations.

Whatever Polanyi thought with respect to divine reality, he shied away many times from making direct reference to it, although he used his hierarchical ontology and his tacit-knowing epistemology to make plain our capability of perceiving such reality. There are three possible reasons for this reticence. It could be a failure of articulation, for instance to explain that the phrase "emotionally powerful meaning" includes or implies an emotional surrender to a felt reality,<sup>12</sup> or that the assertion "literally I believe none of the Lord's prayer" does not exclude the prayer's symbolizing divine transcendence.<sup>13</sup> A second possibility is that the writing reflects Polanyi's diffidence in expressing to friends and acquaintances his religious commitments. Several persons who had had extensive conversations with him on religious matters reported that he had never revealed where he stood himself.<sup>14</sup> A third possibility is that Polanyi actually changed his mind from the time when he regularly attended Anglican worship in the late 1940s to the time of his lectures on "Meaning" and the publication of the book. Which of these are correct I hesitate to guess until I have completed my work on a Polanyi biography. I can only say now that there are many pieces of evidence to justify the claim that he held a belief in a divine reality.

Certain factual matters, however, are available. Polanyi's parents were both of Jewish descent, but by his own account Jewish religion and Jewish nationalism never appealed to him.<sup>15</sup> They evidently played almost no role in the liberal, humanist culture of prewar Budapest in which he grew up. He declared that it was through reading the *Brothers Karamazov* in 1913 that his religious interests were

awakened. He wrote to Karl Mannheim in 1944 "For a time particularly from 1915 to 1920 I was a completely converted Christian on the lines of Tolstoy's confession of faith."<sup>16</sup> In June 1916, when he was searching for a way to do research in chemistry in Karlsruhe, he wrote Kasimir Fajans concerning possible employment as a research assistant that he would gladly join any suggested Christian religion.<sup>17</sup> On October 18, 1919, he was baptized a Catholic, several weeks before he met his bride-to-be, the Catholic Magda Kemeny. She later reported that she did not know how long he remained a Catholic, for his later involvement in Christianity was clearly on the Protestant side.<sup>18</sup> His fondness for the British conception of liberty with its tacit grounding in a Protestant religious outlook led him to considerable appreciation of that outlook. However, as he wrote to an inquirer in 1969, he had never been a communicant of a church.<sup>19</sup>

The strongest element in his religious faith was his conviction, founded early in his life and spelled out in *Personal Knowledge* and his later writings, that the Pauline scheme of redemption describes our situation in trying to achieve an intellectual or moral result: we are called to a level of accomplishment we know to be beyond our weak and corruptible natures, in the hopes of being assisted by powers beyond ourselves.<sup>20</sup> Clearly he experienced and believed in these transcendent powers of grace in relation to successes of knowledge, art, and moral reform. However, he also said that only rarely was he able to believe in the divinity of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

With all his charm and conviviality, Michael Polanyi was at heart a secret person, as a close friend of the years 1913-16 already had observed.<sup>22</sup> Especially he was not a person to share his convictions in a religious community or to participate actively in corporate religious life. I am convinced both that he considered the Christian religion at its best to involve an encounter with and surrender to a preexisting reality and that he must have had some visions himself, however ineffable, of this reality.

## NOTES

1. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 346-48.
2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).
3. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 74-75.
4. Michael Polanyi, "Forms of Atheism, Notes for December Meeting," 8 October 1948, Collected Papers of Michael Polanyi, Joseph Regenstein Library, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill. The Moot was a group of theologians, philosophers, and educators gathered by J. H. Oldham in 1939 to carry out an intellectual, Christian-oriented exercise on the first principles of our civilization. The most outstanding figures in the group were T. S. Eliot and Karl Mannheim. Polanyi attended several of their three-times-a-year meetings from 1944 to 1948.

5. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 198; Polanyi and Prosch, p. 156.
6. Polanyi, "Forms of Atheism, Sec. 2."
7. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 59-60.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
9. Polanyi and Prosch, pp. 57-60.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
11. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 198; Polanyi and Prosch, p. 156.
12. Michael Polanyi, Text for University of Chicago course Social Theory 443, 1969, mimeographed Supplement #4, "Acceptance of Religion," p. 13 (kindly provided to William T. Scott by Polanyi in 1970).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. Kathleen Bliss, Hugh O'Neill, and Richard Gelwick (private communications).
15. Michael Polanyi, "On the Position of Jews" (address to the Jewish Medical Society, Liverpool, January 21, 1936), Regenstein Library (n. 4 above), p. 13.
16. Polanyi to Karl Mannheim, 19 April 1944, Regenstein Library.
17. Polanyi to Kasimir Fajans, 5 June 1916, Bendley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.
18. My thanks are due to Magda Polanyi for showing me the baptismal certificate and for her comments. From Hugh O'Neill I learned that Polanyi's connection with Protestantism must have begun after the summer of 1934.
19. Polanyi to Gilbert Doan, 3 June 1968, Regenstein Library: "When I wrote Science, Faith and Society, I had for some time attended church every Sunday, but I have never been a communicant." Whether this referred only to the Protestant church he had been attending or also to his Catholic status is not clear.
20. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (n. 1 above), p. 324; Michael Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," *Journal of Religion* 41 (October 1961): 246-47.
21. Polanyi to Doan.
22. Jeanne Chambaud to William T. Scott, 6 February 1979.