

# Can Theology be Tacit? A Review Essay on *Personal Catholicism*

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Martin X. Moleski, S.J., *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000. pp. 222. ISBN: 0-8132-0964-1 (cloth), \$54.95.

ABSTRACT Key Words: Martin Moleski, John Henry Newman, Michael Polanyi, illative sense, tacit knowledge, Catholicism, theology

*Martin Moleski summarizes Newman's Grammar of Assent and Polanyi's Personal Knowledge and finds remarkable similarities in their epistemologies, particularly their concepts of "illative sense" and "tacit knowledge". There are, however, problems (particularly in Catholicism) with Moleski's interpretation of the theological significance of the "illative" or the "tacit", as well as ambiguities in the way he relates faith to theology.*

Part of the cultural legacy of the scientific age in which we live is the fact that doubt, uncertainty, and tentativeness are considered intellectually respectable while belief, certainty and commitment are looked upon with suspicion. Since knowledge is thought to be limited to what can be clearly specified and objectively demonstrated, it is considered irresponsible to hold any belief or give assent to any truth without being able to provide clear and explicit grounds for doing so. Such is the morality of knowledge in a world governed by the ideals of critical reason.

Martin Moleski's *Personal Catholicism* examines and compares the work of two unlikely and unacquainted allies in the development of an alternative "post-critical" view of what it means to be rational and responsible in the world today, a view that directly challenges contemporary epistemological assumptions of distrust, objectivity and detachment. John Henry Newman (1801-1890), a convert to Evangelical Christianity, then an Anglican priest and eventually a Roman Catholic Cardinal, characterized his life's work as a confrontation with "religious liberalism". Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) was born a year after Newman died and pursued a career in medicine, physical chemistry and economics, before turning to philosophy to resolve issues regarding the nature and justification of science in a free society. Polanyi converted from Judaism to Catholicism and was later drawn to Protestant thought (specifically that of Paul Tillich), but unlike Newman, he was not personally religious in any traditional sense. What Newman and Polanyi did have in common, however, as Moleski's work makes abundantly clear, was the counter cultural conviction that the path to reliable knowledge proceeds not from doubt or explicit premises, but rather from fiduciary commitments and vague apprehensions. Both were unconvinced by modern forms of rationalism that seemed almost irresistible to most of their contemporaries, and perhaps for that reason, each remained to a certain extent an "outsider" to the dominant intellectual traditions of their day. Newman and Polanyi each began by reacting to the damaging effects of the ideal of instrumental reason on their own specific disciplines (theology and natural science) and ended with nothing less than a radical challenge to the paradigm of rationality itself. They saw, in Moleski's words, that rationality is "greater than logic", and gave persuasive descriptions of the informal operations of the mind which lead from tacit assumptions to true and certain judgments.

Moleski's book is divided into four major parts (preceded by a brief introduction and followed by a personal conclusion, which is also brief but apparently very important since it alone explains and justifies the title of the book). Most of the questions I want to raise concern that conclusion and how it is related to the earlier analysis, but I will begin with an overview of Moleski's project. Parts one and two present chapter by chapter summaries, first of Newman's *Grammar of Assent* and then Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*. Part three compares Newman's notion of the "illative sense" with Polanyi's idea of "tacit knowledge", the key terms each use to characterize the foundation and the process of rational thought. In part four Moleski discusses what he sees as the significant implications of these converging post-critical perspectives for understanding religion and theology. This is further discussed and personalized in his conclusion.

Newman developed his notion of the "illative sense" in his major epistemological essay *Grammar of Assent*. Moleski locates this text in its biographical context and clarifies its purpose and structure. He then traces the line of argument whereby Newman accounts for the capacity and the legitimacy of holding beliefs to be true even though they can be neither fully understood nor explicitly proven. While the title of Newman's essay suggests that he will provide "rules" for the formation of judgment, Moleski shows that his purpose was precisely the opposite. There are no explicit methods or recipes for the mind to follow mechanically in its pursuit of truth. Rather, intelligence is guided towards the act of assent by an anticipatory and informal "illative sense" that operates in a deeply personal way beyond any technical rules. Thus, Newman argues against the attempt to formalize the conditions of legitimate assent. There can be no higher certitude than that given by the illative sense itself and for this reason all judgments are ultimately acts for which we must take personal responsibility.

In his theory of tacit knowledge, Polanyi provides a similar account of reason and responsibility. Moleski again begins by providing a biographical context for Polanyi's major text and then explains its purpose and structure. *Personal Knowledge* is a long and philosophically challenging work and Moleski's methodical chapter by chapter summary is helpful in focusing on Polanyi's central thesis that all knowledge is personal because all knowledge is rooted in fiduciary commitments which necessarily remain tacit. Polanyi sees knowing as an art, and like Newman, he attends to the role of intellectual passions and creative imagination leading the mind forward in the pursuit of truth. He argues that behind all the formal methods and specifiable procedures of scientific inquiry lie the informal and tacit operations of the scientist's own mind. Explicit logical processes are effective only as tools, and the rational application of such tools is always a personal performance, an act of ultimate self-reliance. Polanyi's goal is to describe and account for that personal performance.

Moleski argues that what Newman calls the "illative sense" and what Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge" are basically the same thing. Both describe an irreducible and transcendental dimension of the intellect. However, according to Moleski, while Newman focused on the *capacity* of the mind, Polanyi was concerned with the *product* of that potency, what Moleski calls "the accumulation of tacit knowledge". (96) This interpretation of Polanyi's epistemology, which sees the tacit dimension in the outcome rather than the initiation of the reasoning process, together with Moleski's insistence on the "essential incommunicability" of reality and ideas (101, 102, 104) are crucial, I believe, for understanding his conclusion, and I will return to this point momentarily. Here, I'll simply observe that in addition to arguing the basic identity of the illative sense and tacit knowledge, Moleski notes the intersection of many other aspects of these two epistemologies: the role of conscience in the formation of judgment, the personal character of intellectual commitment, and the description of knowing as an act of integrating subsidiaries or assembling possibilities. He also points out

the similarity of Newman's and Polanyi's self-reflective methodologies, i.e. the fact that neither attempts a formal proof of the operations of intelligence, but rather invite the reader to consider their own experience and to reflect upon their own intellectual performance in order to discover for themselves the irreducibly personal character of knowledge. Considering their diverse backgrounds and purposes, the convergences that Moleski finds are remarkable.

While his stated aim is to illustrate the similarities of Newman's and Polanyi's insights into the personal dimension of human judgment, Moleski does not gloss over their differences. This becomes especially clear in the fourth chapter where he shows how these two authors arrive at very different theological positions despite similar cognitive theories. Thus, while both Newman and Polanyi allow for an apprehension of the reality of God by an illative sense or tacit powers of thought, as Moleski sees it, for Newman faith and revelation are directly related to propositional truth claims of theology in a way that for Polanyi they are not. Despite his use of religious imagery, for Polanyi the reality of God remains in the realm of the tacit, i.e. mystical and inexpressible. Surprisingly perhaps, given the title of the book, Moleski seems to agree with Polanyi rather than Newman in this view of theology.

The major implication for Catholicism that Moleski draws from both Newman and Polanyi in his concluding chapter, where he relates their thought to his own personal commitments, is the need for theology to recognize its own inadequacy. It is important to note that Moleski uses the term "theology" not in the narrow or exclusive sense of "words about God" but in the broader and more common sense of "words about any aspect of one's faith commitment" (for a Catholic that would include God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, The Church, and many other realities). Moleski makes a sharp distinction (a dichotomy perhaps?) between the *personal* knowledge a Christian has of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church, on the one hand, and the *formal* knowledge or propositions of Christian dogma about those same realities, on the other hand. In emphasizing this disjunction of personal religious faith and formal theological reflection, Moleski contrasts two (almost unrelated) forms of knowledge and equates the "illative sense" and "tacit knowledge" only with the former. The result is not only to privilege faith as a tacit way of "knowing more than we can say" but to suggest that the theological task (in any positive sense) is ultimately futile, since theology is incapable of expressing the reality apprehended by faith. Thus, it is the "*priority of faith over understanding*", (141) and not the *relationship* of faith to understanding, that Moleski sees as the real theological significance of Polanyi's epistemology. I think this implication follows from Moleski's focus on "tacit knowledge" as a product of the mind. There is little consideration of the view that Polanyi developed after *Personal Knowledge* when he characterized "tacit knowing" not as a product of the mind but as a process and structure of the mind.

Moleski suggests that the distinction Newman made between the illative sense and formal reasoning and the similar distinction Polanyi makes between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge reveals just how different faith and theology, as two kinds of religious knowledge, really are. But if his intent is to make an analogy between "faith" and tacit or subsidiary awareness, (on the one hand) and "theology" and explicit or focal awareness (on the other hand), then two problems or ambiguities arise.

The first problem is one of coherence. What exactly are the terms of the analogy? Is it faith awareness that is subsidiary and tacit or is it theological dogma? At times Moleski suggests it is the personal knowledge of faith that is tacit, and inarticulate, what Newman would call an act of the illative sense, or a "feeling" to use Moleski's word. Such faith is always knowing "more than we can tell". Theological knowledge, then, which is articulate and propositional, would seem to correspond to Polanyi's "explicit or

“focal” knowledge and Newman’s “argumentative” or “verbal” reasoning. Thus, one Polanyian understanding of faith and theology is that faith is subsidiary knowledge (tacit, informal, unexpressed) and theology focal knowledge (explicit, formalized, articulate). Theology attends from a faith it can never adequately or fully express. Yet, in his concluding chapter, Moleski shifts the terms of the analogy. Here he speaks of the “dogmatic propositions” of theology or “the articulate dimension of revelation” as being “subsidiary”. Rather than considering doctrine the “focal” or explicit dimension of religious knowledge, then, Moleski cautions against a “focus” on these “subsidiary elements”. Does this mean that Moleski now considers faith to be the focal dimension and theological doctrine to be the subsidiary? This would seem to rule out completely theology as a form of critical reflection. It is one thing to say that theology is rooted in a-critical faith awareness, but it is quite another to say that there is no role at all for critical reflection in theology.

The second problem I have with Moleski’s interpretation of Polanyi concerns not so much the issue of how different these two kinds of knowledge (the tacit/subsidiary and the articulate/focal) are, but rather the question of their mutual exclusiveness. Rather than describing explicit theological knowledge as grounded in tacit faith awareness, as Moleski describes them, theology and faith are at odds with one another. “The faith that can be put into words is *not* the real faith. . . . The God that can be put into words is *not* the real God.” (182) “The Jesus who can be put into words is *not* the real Jesus.” (184). Does this mean that the tacit, inarticulate and deeply personal faith knowledge that a Christian has of Jesus Christ is “real” while the explicit, articulate and theological knowledge that arises from that faith is not real? As faith seeks understanding and expression does it move away from reality? In the *Tacit Dimension*, (a work which Moleski does not discuss at length), Polanyi describes the structure of tacit knowing. There he speaks of the *functional aspect* of tacit knowing as a “from-to structure”, and describes how one dwells-in and “attends from” a tacit or subsidiary awareness in order to break out and “attend to” an explicit or focal awareness. (TD p. 10) As a theological illustration of this one might say that a Christian dwells-in and attends from an inchoate faith knowledge in order to seek a more explicit or focal theological understanding. Anselm’s classic expression “*fides quarens intellectum*” seems to express this well. However, in describing what he means by personal Catholicism, Moleski rejects the analogy of “breaking out”. (180) Does this mean one simply continues to accumulate a reserve of tacit knowledge that is “essentially incommunicable” and will never be able to be expressed and shared? Further, when Polanyi speaks of the *ontological aspect* of the structure of tacit knowing, (TD p. 13) he does not consider (as Moleski does?) the explicit or focal pole of knowledge to be empty of reality. Quite the contrary, Polanyi could hardly say that the tacit or subsidiary awareness from which we attend is real, and the explicit or focal awareness to which we attend is not real. Were that the case, the from-to structure of tacit knowledge would lead away from reality rather than toward a discovery of reality. To claim that any object of faith whatever (God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, grace, the church, salvation, the sacraments, morality, etc.) when put into words is not the reality apprehended by faith would be to advocate an apophatic or negative theology in the extreme.

For the sake of discussion I would suggest an alternative interpretation of the theological significance of Newman and Polanyi based on the view that the “illative sense” and “tacit knowledge” describe an intellectual process (not only in theology but in any field) that *begins* with a faith commitment and *culminates* in articulate propositions or truth claims. So understood, the illative and the tacit would refer *not* to inarticulate “faith-awareness” in contrast to articulate “theological doctrine”, *but* rather to the *reasoning process* that moves from the former to the latter. To put this point in the classic terms of “*fides quarens intellectum*”, Newman’s “illative sense” and Polanyi’s “tacit knowledge” account neither for the “fides” (faith) nor for the “intellectum” (dogma), but rather describe the “quarens”, the practice of inquiry itself. This

interpretation assumes, however, that Polanyi was not concerned with describing tacit knowledge as a *product* that accumulates over time, but rather as a presupposition or foundation for an activity of discovery that leads from tacit awareness to explicit knowledge. Theology could be described then not so much as tacit *knowledge* but as tacit *knowing*, an on-going process of attending from a particular faith tradition to a focal expression of rationality that has universal (i.e. catholic?) intent. Knowing (in theology as in any other discipline) could then be seen as an activity that leads not *away from* reality but *toward* reality.

## Electronic Discussion List

**The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can subscribe; send e-mail to Struan Jacobs (swjacobs@deakin.edu.au) who is the moderator. The address for the list is polanyi-list@deakin.edu.au**

## 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 a hard copy and a disk or an electronic copy as an e-mail attachment. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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