

“Longing to Know If Our Knowing Really Is Knowing” Reflections on Esther Meek’s *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People*

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Esther Meek, Michael Polanyi, epistemology, knowing ordinary things, personal participation in knowing, perceptual integration, knowing God, modernism, post-modernism, post-critical, authority in knowing, scripture as authority, religious pluralism.

*These reflections summarize and critically respond to Esther Meek’s **Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People** (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press/Baker Book House, 2003. Pp. 208. \$16.99. ISBN 1-58743-060-6). The book seeks to explain on the basis of the ideas of Michael Polanyi how ordinary acts of knowing happen to work, how they are indeed instances of genuine knowing, and, in comparison with them, how knowing God can possibly work and be a live possibility. Meek’s argument’s most vulnerable premise is its unquestioned acceptance of Scripture as an authoritative guide, which directly raises the question whether Meek’s position is fully post-critical in the sense identified by Polanyi, and indirectly raises the question how Meek is able to handle religious pluralism.*

Esther Meek

For those convinced of the ongoing philosophical relevance of Polanyi’s insights, a new publication by the author of one of the first Ph.D. dissertations on Polanyi (and one of the few) to be completed in a graduate department of philosophy, *Contact With Reality. An Examination of Realism in the Work of Michael Polanyi*, (Temple University, 1983; synopsisized in *Tradition and Discovery*, XXVI:3, 72-83) is welcomed with high expectations. In the judgment of some, Meek’s dissertation offers one of the finer accounts of Polanyi’s overcoming of the acosmism or worldlessness of modern epistemological reflection through his reconceptualization of human knowing from *mental* “correspondence to reality,” to *embodied* “contact with reality.” There Meek stresses how knowing for Polanyi is an embodied relational acquaintance with realities never fully captured by any explicit account, for we recognize something as real precisely in virtue of what she dubs the IFM effect (its range of tacitly apprehended Indeterminate Future Manifestations). Anything written by Meek relating to Polanyi is consequently more than likely to be worthy of serious attention.

Audience and Purpose

The rhetoric and argumentation of *Longing to Know* is not addressed, at least not primarily, to professional philosophers or even students majoring in philosophy. It does not discuss alternative contemporary theories in the manner of an introductory philosophical textbook; nor is it written in the conventional mode of philosophic disputation among contending views. Neither does it present an explication or defense of Polanyi’s ideas by focusing on Polanyi. Rather does it focus on reflectively illuminating our ordinary largely unreflective experiences of knowing, against a background of many years of pondering and deeply appropriating Polanyi’s understanding of knowing. The book is written, as the title indicates,

for the edification of ordinary people (among whom Meek includes herself) who long to comprehend on a well-reasoned but commonsense, experiential basis (keeping to a minimum abstract theoretical reasoning) how ordinary acts of knowing happen to work, how they are indeed instances of genuine knowing, and, in comparison with them, how knowing God can possibly work and be a live possibility.

It's fair to say that Meek's primary purpose in writing the book is to show *how it is possible to claim with reasoned confidence that one can know God*. But to get there, she must first establish that we do know, and can claim with confidence that we do know, ordinary things – and to do that in a postmodern context where the very possibility of knowing anything outside ourselves has been called into question. While she illuminatingly explores the nature and structure of a huge diversity of ordinary acts of knowing, she returns repeatedly to focus in particular on knowing her auto mechanic, Jeff, and on knowing him as reliable for keeping her car in good running shape. She chooses this focus “to stand for every single ordinary act of human knowing . . . because it was ordinary and everyday” (40). From that basis she constructs an extended analogy between the features of this ordinary, workaday, epistemic act and the epistemic act of knowing God. As well, she spends a good bit of time challenging what many take to be barriers preventing recognition of the analogy – e.g., the presumption that faith and reason are wholly distinct and the notion that there is some sort of mystical access to God that is wholly distinct from ordinary knowing. (Actually, she contends that more than an analogy is involved, for she asserts that they are “fundamentally *the same kind of act*” [39, my emphasis]. In any case, she makes clear that she is not asserting an analogy between her auto mechanic and God, only between the structures of the epistemic acts in each case.) Meek comments: “It's a somewhat amusing proposal, but one that offers tremendous hope. In fact we do know our auto mechanic. If it can be shown that knowing God involves the kind of knowing that we already do, then, yes, we can (and do) know God” (41).

Taken-for-granted Assumptions

Meek wrote the book while serving as an adjunct professor of philosophy at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, and it is fair to say (partly on the basis of her own testimony) that the book directly reflects her personable, compassionate style of teaching within that context. Covenant Theological Seminary represents a fairly conservative Evangelical strand within the Reformed Protestant tradition, a tradition strong both on nurturing communal relationships in a safe, trusting environment and on adhering to the authority of Scripture as the revealed Word of God – and, implicitly I would add, adhering to the authority of the Reformed tradition's eye for reading and ear for hearing Scripture (i.e., the Reformed tradition's interpretive sensibility toward Scripture) as the revealed Word of God.

With regard to the authority of Scripture, she writes, “Historically, to be a Christian is necessarily to affirm that certain things are true about God, about humans, and about reality. . . . We affirm that the Bible is God authoritatively telling us the way things are” (22). “When it comes to knowing God, I trust what the Bible says. In fact, I trust it to tell me what I'm feeling as well as what it leads to” (104). “The Bible told me what to do when I first wanted to be right with God” (104). “I have learned to trust the Bible to interpret to me my own experience. The result is that I understand myself more profoundly” (105). Summing up she states, “Scripture is God's authoritatively guiding us to truth about himself, ourselves, and his world” (195). I'll have more to say about this affirmation of the authority of Scriptural authority in what follows. But it is important to note at this stage that, while Meek does acknowledge that not all Christians agree on basic convictions (e.g., p. 144f; let alone agreement between Christians and non-Christians), it doesn't lead her to qualify her affirmation in any way.

This strong affirmation of Scripture’s authority is not just an interesting feature of the background to the book, however. It is the central premise on which Meek’s argument rests that we can indeed know God. Nothing is said to identify it as in any way specially vulnerable to critical challenge, nor is much ventured in its support. The closest thing to support for the affirmation comes, first, implicitly in what might be called a pragmatic argument over the course of the entire book concerning what results when one entrusts oneself to the authoritative guidance of Scripture. (Because Meek doesn’t explicitly allude to this pragmatic argument, I am hesitant to say she intends it as such.) This basic argument is briefly summarized on p. 150: “All those who have struggled to understand who he [God] is by piecing together the pattern of their lives and of this world in light of Scripture’s guidance come to acknowledge the existence of a divine person who seriously outranks them.” (A few examples of such persons are given over the course of the book.) And independently she appeals to the coherence and consistency of the Scriptural witness on p. 163: “In healthy measure my claims about God hang on my trust in the words of the Bible’s writers, which though recorded over millennia consistently unite to affirm that Jesus is God and that he will return to save and to judge.” At no point does Meek acknowledge, or venture to take up and answer, what serious counterarguments have been or might be made to either of these arguments.

Personal Authorial Presence

Primarily Meek’s affirmation (of the divine authority of Scripture) but occasionally also other things both said and unsaid within the book reflect, and at times take for granted, the cultural milieu of Covenant Theological Seminary – perhaps more even than Meek may realize. Meek in no way attempts to hide or obscure this milieu – say, by framing her argument in the distancing impersonal rhetoric of a disincarnate “objective” reflection. Instead, she seeks to have her reader realize (as Polanyi and others have taught us) that thinking and knowing are always incarnately situated in specific places, times, contexts of personal stories and personal relationships, and ongoing traditions of speaking and practice, and that there is no knowing without some actual incarnate knower who ventures (commits herself) with universal intent to be personally and vulnerably present in her knowing in relation to other knowers.

Accordingly, in a very definite and deliberate sense, Meek as author has chosen to be personally present to the reader in the book, refusing the characteristically modern temptation to absent her person from her reflection and knowing by writing “objectively.” Similarly, she welcomes and encourages her reader to become similarly present in her/his own reflection and knowing – and to bring along a companion. In the Foreword she writes, “I have in writing this book told numerous stories and offered many examples from my own life. Please match my stories with your own. My heartfelt longing for this book is that it will lend significance to your own longing for reality and for truth, that it will guide your search, and that it will give you hope” (11). Please note: this kind of authorial presence is no accidental quirk in the rhetoric of Meek’s book. It is a form that is called for by the content she seeks to convey: it “reduplicates”¹ that content in a manner similar to Polanyi’s own self-avowals in Personal Knowledge. The fact that the *how* of what she writes is no less important than the *what* of what she writes is not just implicit either:

So if this model of knowing is new to you, then here is what is going on as you read this book. The words in this book and the experiences of your world are like the surface details of the Magic Eye [3-D pictures, that appear to be a random pattern of tiny colored shapes until the observer attends from them at a certain distance to a focus beyond the surface, when a three dimensional scene emerges into view]. You are struggling to make sense of your life and of my words. I, also by way of these words, am a coach giving directions, suggesting how to

make sense of things, holding forth the hope of what that “sense” will look like, teaching you how to see, and giving you opportunities to practice your skill. If I were with you in person, I would also be able to give you feedback about how you’re doing: “Now you’re getting it!” Or “No, that’s not quite right,” and so on. But whether I am alongside you in person or in the words of this book, in order for you to learn, I must offer myself and my thoughts in my words, and you must struggle to get inside my words, or get my words inside you and figure out from the inside what they mean. (56)

If you, the reader, don’t feel her caring, encouraging presence as you read, guiding you along, you’ve missed something essential:

I’ve decided that my students learn best and try hardest when they know I love them, when they don’t feel threatened. . . . A student recently paid me a backwards compliment: he said, “You’re not safe!” He meant that I blend my scholarly and what you might call my motherly approach in such a way that he can’t tell where the boundaries are. Yet that is what binds his heart to learning. (92)

Intimate Teaching Style

It is also worth noting that the rhetoric of the book both reflects and creates the ambience of a quiet, safe, supportive, non-disputatious, home-like setting that is cognizant of a wider, unsettling, post-modern context where diverse world-views clash and discredit each other, critics flay one another with deconstructive weapons, and supposed experts on knowledge call into question the very possibility of knowing anything at all. But while these threatening perspectives are acknowledged and from time to time are taken up, the contentious force of their questioning is distant, not present. Here there is time and room and support enough in which to discover one’s natural equilibrium and bring to mind what common-sensically we know very well but in the press of intellectual debate we lose touch with.

Meek’s teaching style as exhibited in the book reminds me of the style of Socrates in Plato’s *Meno* where he gently but skillfully educates from an uneducated slave boy an understanding of how to go about drawing a square double the area of an initial square. Socrates doesn’t directly give him the answer – let alone expose him to the skeptical arguments posed earlier in the *Meno* that are capable of bringing inquiry to a standstill – but instead encouragingly midwives him step by step to a place where the slave boy can grasp for himself the answer, how he got there, and that he indeed knows it. This teaching style is a genuine strength that is all too rare in the modern university. In important respects it is often a practical necessity to accomplish the breakthrough Meek is aiming to accomplish in her students. As such, I want to compliment and praise her for it. However, often our greatest strengths have shadow sides to them. Could the nurturing protective care of Meek’s teaching style might also be a liability if, while building their confidence in knowing God, her students are never effectively exposed to how rationally vulnerable that confidence in knowing God may appear in light of the soul searing counterarguments of modernity and postmodernity encountered in their full strength?

Post-Critical or Pre-Critical?

The issue I raise here is not a tangential one to Polyanian concerns. It is a question as to whether the book and its author, despite its apparent mastery of the self-absent ironies of the modern critical intellectual

ethos, have really fully confronted and fully realized the disturbing and disconcerting impact of the modern critiques of faith. To put it in a nutshell, is the book fully *post-critical*, or is it in fundamental respects still *pre-critical*? Has it really faced the problematic juggernaut of the modern critical tradition? Polanyi identifies what he is doing in *Personal Knowledge* as seeking to discover and stake out a *post-critical* philosophy, one that does not attempt to revert to a reaffirmation of some pre-modern faith perspective, nor one that would circumvent the baptism of fire that is the heart of the modern critical “tradition.” Rather, a post-critical philosophy, as I understand what Polanyi meant, is one that has passed through the searing critiques of modernity, continues to affirm what genuine insights there are in those critiques (those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud among them), and yet reaffirms *with a chastened faith*, and draws upon, the original wellsprings of one’s intellectual passions.

Further evidence bearing on the possibility that *Longing to Know* is still in some respects pre-critical is Meek’s identification of *the ideal of certainty* for knowledge to qualify as knowledge² as the source of modernity’s and post-modernity’s epistemological problems. But is this really the source of our problems and the obstacle to the recovery of confidence in our ordinary acts of knowing? According to Polanyi’s own analysis, as I understand it, what makes the modern critical tradition *critical* is not its quixotic pursuit of certainty but its adherence to an attitude of critical suspicion and methodological doubt as the guarantor of respectable claims to knowledge, especially suspicion and doubt directed toward what is assumed to be the inveterate tendency of human subjectivity to distort and color findings of objective fact. A rationally certain, wholly justified explicit proposition would of course pass the test. However, the effective censor here is not the ideal of certainty but an *a priori bias* to critically call into question and force any candidate for belief to provide convincing impersonal justification that will defeat and overcome the methodological bias of critical doubt. That is what makes the modern critical intellectual ethos critical, anti-traditional-- a “tradition” that would bring an end to tradition-- based methodological faith as such--and hostile to the tender, inarticulate intimations of truth that Meek contends (and that I agree) are central to knowing. As well, that is what has recently transformed the modern critical enterprise into a host of post-modern deconstructings of whatever modern ideas have been assumed to have passed the test of critical scrutiny.

I do not presume to know Meek’s own response to this question (Is her book fully post-critical in the sense Polanyi intends?) and would very much like to learn it. I seriously doubt that anyone who has really bought into (sold his soul to?) the modern critical tradition will be persuaded to the contrary by Meek’s book. But perhaps it is unfair to suppose that that is one of its aims. It is significant, however, that no mention whatsoever is made in *Longing to Know* of the enormous body of modern critical biblical scholarship that is widely presumed to have undermined confidence in the divine authority of Scripture, or how one might go about defending and reaffirming the strong position of biblical authority Meek takes in light of that body of scholarship. (By no means do I mean to suggest that the latter is impossible. Others have sought to do so and/or are now seeking to do so. No mention is made of those efforts here, however – not to speak at all of the relative merits of the cases they make.) Yet the assumption of the authority of Scripture as the principal reliable means of access to knowledge of God is the kingpin on which Meek’s central argument for how we can know God hangs. Given that assumption, most everything else flows fairly smoothly and unproblematically. But what about readers who are not already favorably disposed toward it, or readers who are inclined to be favorably disposed but who are only too aware of, and who have not yet found an effective counter to, the serious arguments that have been lodged against it (quite apart from those who are looking for certainty under the old modern model of knowledge)?

A Rich Vein of Examples and Metaphors to Mine

The book itself is gracefully written and very readable. Meek has thoroughly absorbed and made her own Polanyi's understanding of knowing – so well that I find it hard to imagine any better introduction to the basics of what it involves. So often with secondary expositions of Polanyi's epistemology, Polanyi's own examples are employed again and again. Not so with Meek (or hardly ever): her text is full of an enormous range of novel, incredibly apt, down to earth, current, vivid examples, many exceptionally relevant to young people today, and stories of ordinary acts of knowing that would be readily recognizable to anyone (in our culture at least) – all beautifully illustrating each general point she sets out to make. Anyone seeking new examples to explain Polanyi's insights will find Meek's book a rich vein to mine. The many aspects of what it is to know Jeff, Meek's auto mechanic, is an extended, vivid example developed throughout the book in 15 out of its 25 chapters. But other examples range the gamut from figuring out how to view Magic Eye pictures, finding out what went “bump in the night” (a zucchini fell off a window sill and turned on the kitchen faucet), breast feeding an infant, learning to see what was never seen before under the tutelage of a visual artist, understanding Einstein's theory of relativity, “laying out” for a frisbee, recognizing a copperhead snake on a path in the woods, stalking muskrats along with Annie Dillard, Mark McGuire recovering from a batting slump, assessing the risk of surgery, baking bread, solving cryptograms, figuring out that my car needs a new steering pump, and many more. Situations from at least 12 movies are discussed, some repeatedly (each time in greater depth). Lots of stories of people coming to faith and/or losing faith are told. And all of this conveyed with a delightful sense of humor!

Moreover, Meek employs novel metaphors to articulate Polyanian insights in fresh ways. For example, in reference to her proposed switch in models of knowing, she states, “We're no longer wearing an epistemological straitjacket; we're wearing an epistemological leotard” (55). To emphasize the indispensable role of the knower's personal involvement in knowing, she poses this figure: “If a statement is a dot, the act of knowing is a vector to and through the dot. It's like laying out for a Frisbee” (57). In bringing out the personal coefficient to all knowing, she writes, “All stated facts, even $2 + 2 = 4$, crest an unstabile active human effort much as a skin crusts a cooling cup of hot chocolate. Like so many shining electrical bulbs, truth claims tap into a current without which they would not be what they are” (58). A sampling of other fresh metaphors follows: “It is just the ‘messiness’ of it [human knowing] that tells us that we engage the real. Again I speak misleadingly, when I say “messiness”: only from the point of view of an impossible and sterile ideal of fully articulable and justifiable knowledge it is messy. From within our everyday experience it is the lived and sensed rootedness of our acts of knowing.” (143). “The clues that make up our integrations, you might say, are liable to get their feelings hurt if you forget them. They are happy being subsidiary, but you ignore them or take them for granted at your peril” (171). “Knowing takes commitment to that which is yet to be discovered, a kind of pledge of good faith. The lover can see, is permitted to see. The seeing only ever follows and responds to the wanting, the longing, the personal, self-giving pledge” (177).

The Overall Structure of Meek's Argument

Overall, Meek aims to displace our inherited modernist model of knowledge with an alternative model. On the inherited model, knowledge is limited to what can be put into words, as “depersonalized, disembodied pieces of information [thus *already* known] explainable only by reference [according to strict logical

relationships] to other depersonalized pieces of information” (63), and justified – specifically, rendered rationally certain beyond any shadow of skeptical doubt. When applied across the board, this model, as Meek points out, not only leaves precious little, if anything, to count as knowledge, including all advances from unknowing to knowing found in learning and discovery (scientific and otherwise), but it makes havoc in discrediting vast ranges of ordinary everyday acts of knowing that we rely on as such to make it through our days. Nor will it serve to legitimate itself as an accurate account of knowledge; there’s no way that this model can certify itself as the essence of knowledge, let alone do so with certainty. Thus she concludes, “If a key kind of knowing doesn’t fit our model, it’s not right to discredit the knowing; it’s right to discredit the model” (63).

Meek sets out the alternative model with care over the course of most of the book, assisting the reader to understand and securely grasp each of its aspects with the help of numerous concrete examples. My summary of it in what follows is just that, a summary noting only the highlights, for Meek’s actual account is much richer than I can begin to convey here. From a static, depersonalized model with emphasis on fully articulated, ideally certain propositions, she introduces us to the model of an embodied, active, reaching out of the human person, never certain but nevertheless confident, to comprehend and engage the real, only certain aspects of whose knowing activity can be articulated: “Knowing is the responsible human struggle to rely on clues to focus on a coherent pattern [“a making sense of things that opens the world to us” (50, 56)] and submit to its reality” (53 *et passim*). In another context, I have identified this shift in models as a shift from understanding knowledge as exclusively representational to understanding it as primarily acquaintance or relational knowledge, leaving representational knowledge as derivative from and dependent upon the primary type.³

Meek identifies in this model a three-fold structure, each crucial component of which is lost on the modernist model because of its tacit, never fully articulable aspects: (a) our responsible, more or less skillful struggle to make sense of the known (which regularly results, transrationally, in a transformation of our sense of what we can rationally expect of the world), (b) the clues on which our knowing subsidiarily relies (i.e., lives in and through), in our world, in our bodies (especially as we indwell and extend our reach into the world), and in the direction and guidance we receive from others, and (c) the coherent patterns which our responsible struggle to know reaches out to apprehend, that disclose us in contact with objective realities over against us (coherent centers or agencies of ongoing activity – e.g., a copperhead snake on the path before me – that respond to us, decisively shaping the interpretations we give them, both in terms of their present profundity and their future possibilities), to which we must submit as real. Meek’s extended account of how we move from an integration of mostly inarticulate clues to a coherent pattern through which an objective, self-disclosing reality becomes manifest is remarkably insightful and pays careful and repeated examination. She fills out and renders more coherent much of what Polanyi leaves unclear or incompletely developed on these same points. While the realist epistemology she articulates, with its stress on the fallible, partial, and perspectival hold we have on things, is akin to critical realism, its stress on the confident, evolving contact we have with things, as distinct from achieving some definitive representation of things, is akin to direct realism. In effect, Meek’s exposition shows Polanyi’s position to be identifiable with neither of these alternatives and in some sense to lie outside of both of these well-known positions.

Meek’s discussion in chapter 20 of how the inevitability of mistakes in our knowing do not vitiate our contact with reality is particularly insightful – indeed, how despite being mistaken in this or that respect, we can, at least in most cases, still legitimately claim to know a thing, how mistakes themselves can often be turned to positive epistemic effect, and how a consideration of things from different perspectives brings to light how we can move beyond them. On the former model mistakes were simply non-knowledge; on the new model,

mistakes are things we learn from, shortcomings or partialities in our grasp of the real, and occasionally serendipitous keys that unlock a whole new understanding of things we thought we knew well. Importantly, Meek returns toward the end of this chapter (20) and in the following chapter (21) to affirm the partial truth and continuing subordinate importance of the former model's insistence on rigor in our scrutiny of claims to know, their justification (especially once its false ideals of certainty and explicitness have been deposed), and the bases on which we arrive at our conclusions.⁴ She goes on to devote a chapter to dealing with doubts and apparently contrary evidence concerning what we are striving to know, another to our ethical obligations to what we seek to know, and still another to the hope that undergirds the model of knowing she is offering:

On a model that required certainty, certainty ended up dying, and little hope seemed to remain for knowing anything, let alone knowing God. An extended look at ordinary human experience in knowing has helped us to see that knowing happened, to see how it works, and to see how we can reasonably hope by means of it to access the real. The misguided quest for certainty was in the end the very thing that blinded us to the substantial grounds we have for confidence in our efforts to engage the world. We cannot be exhaustively certain; nor would we want to pay its price. The alternative to what is in fact sterile certainty is a very fertile capacity to engage and evoke reality. We need not mourn its demise when *confidence* waits in the wings to replace it. And confidence is a concept that accords better, and not only with the risky efforts of our ventures. It also accords better with the prospect of their success. It restores hope. (181)

Following each stage of Meek's exposition of the alternative Polanyian model of knowing (specifically, in the last sections of chapters 7 through 23) she returns to and emends her account of knowing Jeff, her auto mechanic (begun in chapter 4), and, in analogy with it, her account of how it is that we can know God. Her stress is on the ordinariness of such knowing and a continuity across all types of knowing in opposition of those who would assert that knowing God entails a different or special kind of knowing.

Some writers, for example, have stressed that knowing God, as distinct from other kinds of knowing, involves a peculiar sort of mystical experience, that it relies upon some authoritative word as a source of knowledge, that it requires a commitment (that can be at times obstinate), and/or that it demands some sort of faith (an entrustment of ourselves beyond what we can presently justify). Meek's response to these supposed distinguishing marks is, first, to explain that, as long as ordinary experience is not limited to a narrow empiricist conception where everything is supposed to be explicitly specifiable, there is no need for religious knowing to appeal to any non-ordinary sort of "mystical" experience (actually, in accord with her Reformed Protestant tradition, she seems dismissive of any notion of "mystical" experience as such). Second, she explains how each of the other three marks, properly understood, are involved in ordinary non-religious acts of knowing, including (following Polanyi's account) scientific knowing; they aren't opposed to rationality (commonsense, ordinary rationality) but rationality in crucial respects depends on them.

Thus, in a manner fundamentally similar to how we know ordinary things such as the reliability of an auto mechanic, knowing God, according to Meek's account, involves a responsible ongoing struggle to rely on clues, drawn from the full range of our experience and the words of trustworthy guides (God meets us, according to Meek, in the Word, in the world, and in ourselves [195]), to focus on a coherent pattern of overarching meaning through which the transcendent reality of God begins to disclose itself to us and we submit to its reality. In her own words,

Coming to know God is like this. You hear a friend describe what the Bible says about God and about why you need to know him. It makes surprising and humbling sense of our experience. It makes sense of your significance and glory; it makes sense of your brokenness. It holds the prospect of being the very thing you've been longing for. You decide to take the risk and reach out to Jesus Christ, asking him to forgive your rebellion and trusting him to save you. . . . Our study of the Bible, combined with your experiences of our selves and our world over time, builds our grasp of who God is. We grow in knowing him as we try to do what he says to do. So it is that knowing God, like knowing an auto mechanic, involves a moving from unknowing to knowing, and at each point of contact fresh decisions to trust and follow are called for. (67-68)

Further,

The pattern of God's ways and words [to the apprehension of which her efforts at integrating clues are directed] stretches to the very edges of my life experience and greets me each new day with fresh installments. The grand drama of redemption recorded in Scripture lends meaning to my human experience. In light of it I recognize my dignity as a human, the inherent worth of my efforts in this world, and the longing for glory and restoration that my pain and brokenness cry out for. Plus, integrating to the pattern of the God of Scripture takes "coherent center of agency" [Meek's characterization of realities that disclose themselves through the patterns of our perceptual integrations] to a new level! (122)

Meek is careful to take account of the genuine struggles that people of faith have in maintaining a confident sense of the reality of God: desert periods in which God's presence is not felt, challenges to one's faith from others, and encounters with the presence of evil in one's own experience and that of others. Her treatment of these is both genuine and insightful.

The one difference she does introduce between knowing God and knowing an auto mechanic is that of an obstacle, a "bentness" (human rebellion against God), in our nature that keeps us from recognizing God (see, among other places, pp. 94-95). We do not always want what is good, and these desires unavoidably influence how we dispose ourselves in integrating the clues that shape our knowing and acting. As a result, we see what we want to see, and not necessarily what is there to be seen. So what we see is sometimes "bent" or distorted, unsubmitive to God. Thus our "bentness" cannot but cloud our knowing. But this "bentness," according to Meek, is curable. "But that is the point of the life-giving message of the good news of Jesus Christ. The one to whom we are resistantly blind is perfectly positioned to cure our blindness" (165). Hence we need to ask for help from wise guides and divine grace with the orientation of our hearts. Nevertheless, this "bentness" in our nature, she contends, does not contradict the structural similarity between the two kinds of knowing.⁵

The Possibility of Being Religiously Mistaken

Could such a supposed knowing of God as Meek expounds and defends be comprehensively wrong or wrong in significant respects? Meek responds:

In healthy measure my claims about God hang on my trust in the words of the Bible's writers, which though recorded over millennia consistently unite to affirm that Jesus is God and that he will return to save and to judge. Could they have been wrong? It's possible. Could I be mistaking their import? Possibly; certainly in some measure. Can I nevertheless see that I am involved in an act of knowing with respect to God—an integrative pattern making to which I submit as it engages me in the world? Profoundly yes. Can I come to understand better, increase my skill at knowing God? Yes. My knowing will inevitably benefit when I study the Bible and the world carefully, think through my "inner game," trying to embody what my coaches are saying. (163-164)

So Meek does acknowledge fallibility here. While she does admit that her understanding of the reality of God is resistant to contrary interpretations of events and experiences that would discredit Scriptural claims (as are virtually any of our non-religious convictions, she is careful to note), this obstinacy of belief, she clarifies, is not immune to every conceivable counterattack. She also points out that the Bible doesn't portray God as calling his people blindly to obey. For example, she points out how it appeals to the empirical testimony of God's mighty acts and the beneficial results from living faithfully in relationship with him. Nor, she says, is the basis for her theological understanding simply a matter of trusting the words of the Bible, her parents, and her teachers, for her own experiences of having lived as a Christian for many years has led to new and fresh ways to apply Scripture to her experience.

I wonder, however, how much Meek has considered in this connection the sort of error that can arise from self-reinforcing systems of implicit belief, as in the Azande belief in Witchcraft that Polanyi discusses in *Personal Knowledge* (to which Meek makes no reference). Polanyi there remarks (*PK* 294),

I conclude that what earlier philosophers have alluded to by speaking of coherence as the criterion of truth [on which Meek has placed so much, though not exclusive, emphasis] is only a criterion of *stability*. It may equally stabilize an erroneous or a true view of the universe. The attribution of truth to any particular stable alternative is a fiduciary act which cannot be analyzed in non-committal terms. . . . [T]here exists no principle of doubt the operation of which will discover for us which of two systems of implicit beliefs is true—except in the sense that we will admit decisive evidence against the one we do not believe to be true, and not against the other.

This comment, of course, does not resolve the issue, but it does raise the possibility that one can have a comprehensive religious interpretation of life and the world that is entirely coherent as understood from within (i.e., makes sense of experience, even more apparent sense than other religious views as comprehended from that perspective) and that is, nevertheless, fundamentally in error – error that, according to Polanyi, cannot be non-committally and neutrally (in independence from a competing world view) determined as such. Other, apparently contradictory views will seem to be in error, just as this view will seem to be in error from their perspective. This raises the thorny problem of religious pluralism, the problem of the apparent conflict between competing religious claims, and Meek has offered us precious little insight as to how to approach dealing with it.

The Problem of Religious Pluralism

After carefully working through Meek's argument on behalf of knowing God, I am left thinking that it would be possible to mount an exactly parallel argument – changing only a few words and names and references to sacred scripture but no essential element in the structure of the argument Meek presents – on behalf of knowing, say, the *Dao* in Chinese Daoism, the *Dharmakaya* in Mahayana Buddhism, *Allah* in Islam, or *Brahman* in Vedantic Hinduism – indeed, as no less “coherent centers of agency” than the God of the Bible. Perhaps more disturbing, would it not be possible to mount an argument culminating in knowing my ultimate blessing in the Celestial Heaven according to Mormonism, attaining to complete “clarity” in Scientology, or realizing mystical identity with the Mother Goddess in Wicca? I can well imagine a follower of one of these alternative religions enthused with what appears to be a possibility of demonstrating that one can *know* whatever the ultimate reality is conceived to be in these religions. (I ponder these possibilities not simply as an amateur in the comparative study of religions but as one who has studied and taught in the discipline of the comparative study of religions, utilizing a methodology of systematic disciplined empathy, for over 30 years.) What would stand in the way of mounting any of these arguments? Has Meek presented a basis for ruling out any such argument as significantly less plausible for those respective followers than her argument comes across as being for Reformed Protestants?

Meek does at least say this: “It [the Bible] tells me that this Jesus is the only way to God, and that the only way to know Jesus is through God's telling us about him in the Bible, and God the Holy Spirit's making me understand. What the Bible tells me makes sense of my experience that Christianity alone is different from all other futile efforts to reach God” (87). These other religions could, of course, make a similar claim, but some representatives in fact do say that their faith is not an exclusive way to at-onement with ultimate reality. Meek goes on to write,

Could the world be not God's clothes, but God, as some pagan religions hold? This makes less sense of my experience. If all that is real is God, then either God is not good, or evil is good. What is, is good, and is God. But that makes no sense. . . . It makes more sense to see ourselves and our world in broken relationship to God, rather than as God. Of course that means God must be a person, rather than a force, and persons rightly expect things of you. Rather than face this painful thought, many people opt for the force. But the question is not which is more comfortable, but which makes better sense of my experience. (88)

Without going into point by point detail here, my first thought is that this hardly represents an empathetic understanding or a fair appraisal of any of the sophisticated pantheisms of which I am aware or of their respective conceptions of morality. In any case, there are several other religious traditions which hold to a person-like conception of the ultimate reality akin to Meek's understanding of the Christian God – e.g., Islam, Vaishnava Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. I.e., Christianity is hardly unique in this respect.

One of the points I wish to make is that if we are to assess apparently contradictory religious claims between different religions fairly and justly, we need to do our very best to make sure we have understood them to the satisfaction of knowledgeable, reflective, mature insiders plus level-headedly and carefully listened to how such insiders respond to the critical issues we raise. (As well we need to be aware of how vulnerable our own tradition, as may be seen and understood by others, is to their critical evaluation.) Very often what appears

to be a significant difference between one tradition and another is not the difference it appears at first to be (and may not be the contradiction it first appeared to be), and what appears to be agreement on digging deeper may turn out to harbor a significant disagreement.

Let us suppose for the moment that this kind of inter-religious inquiry can be mounted and that disciplined empathetic understandings can be developed all around – a big “if.” If so, it would mean that we are not just left with contradictory counterclaims; there would be something of a quasi-neutral ground on which to inquire. (It would not be non-committal, but a ground of mutuality opened up by an overlap of our commitments.) What can we hope to determine thereby? My surmise, based on considerable efforts made in this direction by myself and others, is that a lot can be learned about not only commonalities and divergences far beyond what is evident on the surface but also how capacious, coherent, and profound are the explanations of the life issues that the great religious traditions other than our own offer (less so for the alternative traditions mentioned above). What are we to make of that? I am myself inclined to confess my agnosticism regarding where we are likely to end up. On some issues we will come to mutual understanding and agreement. On other issues we will come hopefully to mutual understanding but disagreement, possibly learning that we aim at fundamentally distinct but not necessarily contradictory goals. On still other issues we may come to no clear resolution or nothing close to agreement as far as we can determine. Meek is inclined to simply take the apparent Scriptural word that Jesus is the only way as settling the issue. I realize that Scripture says this, but I am not so confident that I fully know and understand what it means and how it is to be applied in this context.⁶

Might it be that the Daoist, the Buddhist, and the Hindu have just as much legitimate *claim to know* their ultimate reality as does Meek along with her fellow Reformed Protestants on the sort of basis that she claims she knows, especially given that there is no neutral, non-committal basis for determining which is true and which is false? Does a positive answer to this question necessarily entail the contradiction that Meek believes it must? All of this raises anew in my mind one of the longstanding issues over Polanyian interpretation: Do religious realities exist (or not) independently of our commitments, or are they sustained in being as it were (“validated,” to use one of Polanyi’s terms) by our commitments?⁷ Clearly Meek wants to say that they do exist independently, though we cannot refer to them non-committally (just as we cannot refer to any reality non-committally), and I have been and still am inclined to agree. However, the issues that I am raising here constitute an important set of evidence against this position, or at least on behalf of qualifying it. There are two matters touched upon in Meek’s overall argument that directly bear upon this: the analogy with Magic Eye pictures and her account of the role of authoritative guides for our knowing.

First, Meek makes a great deal of the case of Magic Eye pictures, which first appear as a two-dimensional field of minute meaningless random colored figures. The directions tell us to look with patience for a meaningful three-dimensional pattern to appear several inches beyond the surface of the picture. Lo and behold, at least for those of us who are not Magic Eye picture challenged, a three-dimensional image, say, of leaping dolphins then appears. The curious thing to me, which Meek doesn’t begin to explore, is the status of the three-dimensional image: what sort of ontological status does it have? We sometimes call such things “virtual realities.” They only exist actually for those who actively integrate the visual clues to their appearance, and then only for the moment in which we do (and, of course, in our memories of having done so). In any case, they don’t exist independently of our integration in the way that the marble owl sitting above me on my window sill does. Yet, quite reliably, they appear again and again in consistent ways as we return to the integration that occasions their appearance, so we can say that their potential knower-dependent virtual existence exists independently of anyone’s present actual integration.

Now I can imagine that Meek would concede that the religious realities of religious traditions other than Christianity (as she understands it) have at least this sort of virtual reality for their adherents; they *know* it at least in this sense. The trouble is, I can imagine that those adherents would concede that God for her, the God she claims to know, has at least this sort of virtual reality too. And as well I can readily imagine both sides conceding that the others *believe that* the “virtual reality” that they thereby “know” isn’t just virtual, but that it exists (or the reality to which it refers exists) independently of their integration. What is it, on the Polanyian grounds that Meek adduces, that enables us to mark and tell the difference between virtual reality and independently existing reality? Meek would no doubt appeal to the way the latter manifests itself inexhaustibly, that it comes across as a center of self-initiating and self-disclosing activity towards us, and even that it comes across as being cognizant of us even as we are of it. But what is to prevent adherents of other traditions appealing in pretty much the same way to the same sort of features of the religious realities they claim to know? Some adherents of which I am aware actually do so. What are we to make of that? Meek doesn’t seem to allow for that possibility, let alone indicate how she might respond. Is she open to genuine inter-religious dialogue on this matter? On the basis of *Longing to Know*, it doesn’t seem so.

Second, Meek makes a strong case (chapter 13) for the role of authoritative guides in everyday commonsense knowing, both by way of traditions of practical knowing (e.g., the practical know how passed on among auto mechanics) and teachers/mentors who provide us with direct instruction. She points out how this is involved in science too, as well as in Christian life and learning. Specifically, in Christian life and learning Sacred Scripture plays an indispensable, crucial role in this respect, especially in the Reformed Protestant tradition in which she stands. The Bible for her is the instruction book for Christians. The issue I wish to raise pertains to the status of the guiding authoritative word. Is it a pointer to truths that are ultimately accessible directly and/or independently of the pointer, or is Scripture itself truth (or at least an essential part of the truth)⁸ as far as human beings are concerned?

Søren Kierkegaard drew a distinction (in his *Philosophical Fragments*, among other places) between a socratic teacher and an apostolic teacher (and ultimately, behind the apostle, the God-man, Jesus Christ). A socratic teacher, like in the story from Plato’s *Meno* alluded to earlier, is the occasion for the student coming to understand certain eternal truths, but he (the socratic teacher) is inessential to the truth itself. He is merely, as it were, a pointer to the truth that the student must come to apprehend for himself. And when the student has done so, the student stands, at least in respect to that truth, equal to the teacher and the teacher, as it were, drops out of the picture. An apostolic teacher, or the word of an apostolic teacher, to the contrary, is not a mere occasion or pointer for the student; he is essential. The student’s relation to the truth passes through the teacher’s word and is only accessible through that authoritative word. On receiving the truth in question, the authoritative word of the teacher doesn’t drop out of the picture.

Meek doesn’t seem ready to recognize such a distinction and conflates the two types of teacher into the second type (perhaps her interest in minimizing the difference between knowledge of God and knowledge of other sorts is a factor in this connection). She writes, for example,

Once we have personally developed a skill, the authoritative word no longer seems to operate in a grand void, as it did when we were novices. . . . We no longer have a sense of blindly trusting words we hardly understand. We have achieved our own pattern of world experiences and thus accessed the real. We now interpret aright for ourselves our bodily sense. But actually, in our personal success we have not left the guiding words behind. We

have only come to live in the words, embody them. They are no longer outside us; they are inside us. (101)

Although she doesn't quite say it here, I get the impression from this and what else she writes in this chapter that generally Meek holds that we don't grow in our knowing beyond the words of our authoritative guides. I think that is simply not true, at least in many cases. Yet I am ready to concede that it would have to be true in the case of Meek's strong affirmation of Scriptural authority.

But if so, how does that not leave us in the situation of the Magic Eye pictures? Being ineradicably dependent on the depiction of God given in Scripture and having no (or very little) independent access to the reality of God, what is it that makes God thus depicted more than a virtual reality for us (not just three-dimensional and more or less static, but active and dynamic and self-disclosing as well, both to us and simultaneously to others who entrust ourselves to the same Scripture)? I would really like to know. In *Personal Knowledge* (pp. 196-199) Polanyi talks about the Christian mystic's effort to "break out" of our normal conceptual framework in seeking an ecstatic vision of at-onement with God. This would seem to point to a means of independent access to the reality of God beyond present representations, including those of Scripture, while nevertheless relying on the Christian conceptual framework as a pointer to that reality. But Meek's denegation of mystical experience seems to close off this possibility, at least in her judgment. So, again I ask, what is it that makes knowing God more than knowing a virtual reality, and that would differentiate knowing God in a clear and decisive way from knowing the *Dharmakaya* through reliance upon Buddhist scriptures (which, by the way, Buddhists insist are just pointers) or knowing *Brahman* through reliance upon the Vedas, etc.?

A Concluding Note

Despite my many questions and critical reservations, I think *Longing to Know* is important and valuable for many reasons, for the reasons I have already given as well as for others I have not given. One of the most important reasons of all, in my judgment, that I have not mentioned earlier is the confidence and incentive to reflect and inquire philosophically with Polanyian resources that *Longing to Know* conveys to ordinary folks who already happen to rely, or who are ready to rely, on Scripture in the way Meek does. From what I am learning of the popular reception the book is receiving in many and widening circles, this is something to be celebrated and encouraged. If anything is able to combat the anti-intellectual, close-minded tendencies of much of right wing Protestantism, insiders reflecting and inquiring philosophically will do so probably more effectively than anything else.

Endnotes

¹ On the concept of 'reduplication' and its purpose, see Søren Kierkegaard's *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

² According to Stephen Toulmin, the root problem of the modern idea of rationality is not the ideal of certainty by itself but the ideal of a theoretical, person-and-culture-invariant (context independent) – i.e., *mathematical* – formulation of the explanatory principles underlying what appears. This is the specifically modern take on (i.e., interpretation of) *universality* as an essential requirement of knowledge, in addition to *certainty* and *necessity*. Meek alludes to these three, but focuses almost exclusively on certainty as the source

problem. In any case, Toulmin's point about universality surely is a matter to be taken into account in addition to the methodological doubt at the heart of the modern critical tradition that I go on to describe. See Toulmin's *Return to Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

³ Dale Cannon, "Construing Polanyi's Tacit Knowledge as Knowing by Acquaintance Rather than Knowing by Representation: Some Implications," *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical* 29:2 (2002-2003), 26-43. Meek does not utilize this terminology, but I believe it replicates fairly well the shift she articulates. Meek's account of the new model of knowing alludes (e.g., in reference to Einstein's Theory of Relativity) to the derivative status of representational knowledge relative to acquaintance knowledge, to use my terminology, but she does not develop an explanation of their relationship to any extent. To some extent this can become a problem in so far as Meek's account of the integrative patterns to which our efforts at knowing are directed seems to conflate perceptual patterns immediately experienced and explanatory structures beyond immediate experience that we formulate in theoretical explanations. The two are not the same and it is not clear on Meek's account how they are not the same, though perhaps she could account for the latter in terms of impersonal "coherent centers of agency" that are disclosed through specific perceptual patterns. Yet Meek's account of a tree understood as conforming to impersonal laws that govern its behavior versus the tree understood "as a thing made and moved by the utterly faithful words of an infinite person for his own delight" (144) would seem to leave little room for a scientific explanation (or at least not much appreciation for one).

⁴ Meek does not, however, bring out what truth still lies in the representational understanding of knowledge that the old model exclusively emphasized.

⁵ The category of "bentness" becomes interestingly problematic in reference to persons occupying perspectives (e.g., religious world views) other than our own, whereby we are tempted to attribute the obstinacy of their belief structures to their "bentness." Meanwhile, relative to our lack of empathic understanding of them we may be no less "bent" than they are, if not more so.

⁶ I say this partly from having come to realize that there often can be found much that is worthy of profound appreciation in traditions other than my own – even things I can learn and appropriate without compromise as a Christian – but partly also from coming to realize how this very passage of Scripture, among others, can easily become a pretext for inhospitality, lack of charity, and an unreadiness for empathy toward persons and practices that are simply unfamiliar and strange. On the other hand, I am not at all in favor of mindless tolerance and relativism. What is key here is more sensitive discernment, not less.

⁷ Maybe we could say this about the ultimate reality in its "manifest aspects" (what Hindu's call *saguna Brahman*) while ultimate reality in its "unmanifest aspects" (*nirguna Brahman*) transcendentally exists independently of our merely human apprehension and our capacity to represent it.

⁸ This would make Scripture a representative or representational truth of Revelation, to be taken at its divinely authorized word. It would represent truth that is directly inaccessible, at least as far as this life is concerned. Knowledge by acquaintance of such truth would not be possible, only knowledge by acquaintance of its representation in Scripture.