
REVIEWS

Murray A. Rae, Editor, *Critical Conversations: Michael Polanyi and Christian Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012. Pp. x + 189. ISBN 978-1-61097-727-2. \$23.00 pb.

Polanyi's interest in Christianity and the interest of many Polanyians in Christianity is intriguing, although some have found it disconcerting. Polanyi surprises many with his references to Augustine, St. Paul, the Christian scheme of Fall and Redemption, etc. Rae's collection of essays adds to a considerable literature on Polanyi's ideas in relation to Christianity. But Christianity is not one dimensional, as the essays here clearly demonstrate. The nine authors, many familiar to Polanyians, discuss an array of topics, and my brief comments, which often use the authors' words, mention only a few elements of these interesting essays.

In "Knowledge in Science and Religion: A Polanyian Perspective," Tony Clark suggests, "In *Meaning*, Polanyi argues against the rigid distinctions that ... separate the arts and the sciences, and science and religion" (19). While Polanyi's epistemology was especially influenced by his work in the sciences, it can readily be applied to all other areas of scholarly endeavor. In its focus on persons, it has a certain integrating function among all fields of study. Each field has a "body of beliefs and practices" and "a community of faith." Clark continues, "... in radical discontinuity with an Enlightenment view, Polanyi shows that the kinds of knowledge that are established in science stand in substantial continuity with the kinds of knowledge established in religion" (31). Having presented this continuity, he concludes, "... this

essay leaves open vast and pressing questions about the truth claims of different religious communities" (32) for future discussions—a challenge to future authors.

R. T. Allen shows, in "The Dialectic of Assimilation and Adaptation Revisited," how our tacit and innate knowledge, from childhood forward, is assimilated and adapted to new experiences: "We are all, and necessarily so, tacit metaphysicians and epistemologists, forming, employing, and adapting tacit ontologies, and standards for knowing" (35, fn3). In this light, Allen reviews the impersonal approaches found in Scholasticism with its dependence upon the Greeks and the "rekindling" of this dependence in the Renaissance followed by the Enlightenment (53-54). In contrast to this impersonal approach, the Apostle John and Augustine see "love" to be the essence of God that needs application "in detail" to philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines. But "Christian philosophy and theology has too often assimilated itself to, instead of adapting, an inadequate philosophy" (48). Allen's thesis is that "knowing is an expression of love [which] has the corollary that, *ceteris paribus*, ignorance is the result of lack of love and error that of hatred" (53). Allen's thinking seems, in my view, to have much in common with Esther Meek's affirmations in *Loving to Know*.

Alan Torrance's "Society, Skepticism, and the Problem of Moral Inversion," as its title suggests, is an effort to sort out Polanyi's sometimes confusing discussions of "moral inversion" and political order and build on these discussions. Torrance suggests connections between Polanyi's

ideas and ideas in Reformed epistemologists and Barth. He notes the implications of Polanyi's affirmation of a stratified universe for his social philosophy. Torrance tries to address the sharp criticisms of Polanyi's claims about "moral inversion" by Zdzislaw Najder (in his essay in *Intellect and Hope*), an effort that would be much stronger if he considered D. M. Yeager's essay on moral inversion and Najder's misreading (TAD 29:1). Finally, Torrance turns to questions about Christian revelation and the political order.

In "The Theological Promise of Michael Polanyi's Project," Lincoln Harvey first accuses "modern Western society" of tacitly embracing an "atheistic character" (57) as is reflected, for example, in assumptions of figures like James Watson (of DNA double-helix fame), who regards human beings as "little more than sacks of water and chemicals fizzing around" (57). Such an account is problematic, "not only because the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ actually exists, but also because the pre-existing definition of God places an unbearable burden upon the scientists' shoulders" (58). Scientists like Watson are too ready to play God. Harvey debunks the "view-from-nowhere" (63) just as Polanyi critiques scientific objectivism. However, Polanyi's realistic epistemology also affirms "the reality of an *objective truth*" which "stands independent of our knowing it" (65). We make contact with reality and truth is known over time. Polanyi's stance differs sharply from not only objectivists, but also from relativists for whom there is "an unavoidable *pollution* of our motives" (65). Thus Harvey argues Polanyi's ideas have important theological promise and his notions about fragile epistemic progress fit with a Christian view that human knowledge is part of divine creation.

Peter Forster's "Michael Polanyi and Karl

Barth: A Creative Congruence?" suggests tacit powers can be used "to illustrate and shape our knowledge of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ" (102). Concerning Scripture, it "sets boundary conditions for the possibility of human expression at the lower level," and "the meaning of the words of Scripture *in their purpose as Scripture* would be given from the higher level of God's revelation of Himself" (103). Concerning anthropology, both Polanyi and Barth summon man as a rational creature "to responsible choice" (105). This shortest of chapters (15 pages) contrasts starkly with the voluminous writings of Barth and is a thought-provoking essay for Barth fans.

"Truth and Dialogue: Polanyi, Gadamer, and Theological Hermeneutics," by the late David J. Kettle, the longest chapter here (34 pages), contrasts our "Cartesian habits of imagination" (treated in his essay in TAD 27:1, 22-32) with Gadamer's "horizons of questionableness." For more on Kettle's thought, see Meek's recent book review in TAD (39:1, 74-76) treating Kettle's posthumously published *Western Culture in Gospel Context: Towards the Conversion of the West: Theological Bearings for Mission and Spirituality*.

"Science Meets Violence: An Anthropological Comparison of the Thought of Michael Polanyi and René Girard" by Bruce Hamill explores the compatibility of Polanyi's thought, which links science and religion and has "often been regarded as a savior of theological epistemology," with René Girard's thought which has "reopened discussion on atonement and the theology of the cross" (141).

Paul Weston's "Michael Polanyi and the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin" provides a careful

analysis of Newbigin, showing his use of Polanyi and traditional ideas of Christian revelation, with particular interest in Newbigin's later missiology. Newbigin, following Polanyi, challenges those with religious faith to realize that there is "a reality which is not in my mind but 'out there.' And the proof of this is my willingness to publish and test it in all relevant situations" (173). Religious claims are made with universal intent; they must be tested for a correspondence to reality, just as scientific claims must be tested by a public community. "[I]t follows that truth—which Polanyi defines as contact with an independent and hidden reality that manifests itself in the future in indeterminate and unexpected ways—is not the property solely of the empirical sciences."¹ Such reality suggests that only one religious interpretation can be true. Thus, religions should compete convivially in the public arena to demonstrate, as we move towards the future, which one is the Polanyian truth. Each religion must garner its most passionate and focal knowledge to establish itself as this truth. This heuristic process seems to preclude a strong claim today that many religions are "true" in different ways. Newbigin's adaptation of Polanyi in my interpretation brings a new challenge to this modern notion of the validity of religious pluralism. Moreover, Newbigin concludes, based on Polanyi's philosophy, that religions have as much claim to "truth" as does science. Christians and churches should gain confidence that their claims to truth are as valid as the scientists' (173). That is, Christian belief cannot be treated only as a "personal" decision, but must be promulgated with universal intent (175).

On one hand, this book does not explore very directly what I believe is the major issue for Christian Polanyians, namely the nature and extent of the authority of the Scriptures. Are the Scriptures the very word of God—written, inerrant

and infallible when properly understood and the ultimate authority for every area to which they speak? Or are they one authority among many? I do not see a place or category in Polanyi's work that allows a fixed, infallible authority, and this will be a problem for some Christians. On the other hand, this book, far more than I anticipated, shows confluences between Christian theology and aspects of Polanyi's thought. For any Christian who is a student of Polanyi, this book is a must-read. For those who are students of other authors discussed in this book, the authors' "Christian take" is of interest. For other Polanyians, this book certainly broadens *and deepens* the Polanyian conversation about modern epistemology and culture.

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¹Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi: The Art of Knowing*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006): 100.