



SCIENCE AND FAITH IN A GAME OF STRATEGY



Marty Folsom

Keywords: Michael Polanyi, Belief, the Modern Mind, Morality, Tradition and Belief, Science and Faith

ABSTRACT

In this article, Michael Polanyi engages a young audience in a confrontation of worldviews. He is resistant to a form of scientific belief that has defaulted to a naturalism that undermines the human experience of social cohesion. He proposes a return to Christian belief to provide a way toward a better future. But has he given us anything to trust in, other than switching parties with whom to affiliate? Does he actually direct us to consider the contents of “what to believe” or contend that we should believe in the Christian community for better moral outcomes? Is Polanyi’s final goal a deeper investigation of “what to believe” or to create a moral outcome he believes is missing? And is morality the final goal of belief?

In “What to Believe,” Polanyi is playing a chess game. He intends to show the tactics of two theoretical opponents who both play with a similar set of rules, namely that humans believe within the context of communities. It is not until the end of the article that we see that the agenda of “winning the game” for Polanyi is to have the listeners believe in a society with a positive moral outcome facilitated by a confident return to Christian faith. We will explore the logic of his game and ask whether this is a goal worthy of science or the Christian faith, as well as ask what Polanyi could make possible in collaborative believing.

To begin, we must clarify the meaning of the title as it sets the stage for the game. “What” one is to believe usually focuses on the content of a specific discipline. In fact,

the form of Polanyi's argument does not investigate the content of any specific form of religious thought. Polanyi appears inclined to affirm the place of Christianity (his hopeful winner), but offers no answer to the question of "what to believe" about the methods or contents of its beliefs. There is no heuristic vision to explore the claims of Christianity.

Polanyi's argument intends to "respond...to the teachings of the Christian religion," but Christianity is not significantly engaged. Polanyi presumed that the mesmerized-by-science audience is somewhat Christian, but tainted by a particular form of modern science. He acknowledges disparities in various forms of Christianity. However, he moves forward an argument that there is an essential theology for the creation of faith. It is this active faith that he sees as the perennial source of religious knowledge. Here we might ask whether Polanyi is employing a tainted form of Christianity whose goal is social morality. Polanyi certainly is not following Barth's scientific, revelational model where knowledge is grounded in God's self-giving. Barth's work was to overcome a Christianity developed through human discovery, the creation of religious knowledge, or any form of humanly-generated faith or morality.

In following Polanyi's chess moves, we might reframe the title as focusing on "what we may believe to become moral together." He proposes that both science and faith base their confessions on discovered traditions, but with different moral outcomes. Thus, his opening strategic move will act to equalize the rules of play; however, he does not yet reveal his preferred outcome.

Polanyi desired a renewal of social cohesion. This is boldly set up over against the grandmaster called modern science whose agenda of skepticism is the threat to be countered. For Polanyi, the individual seeking moral emancipation follows a strategy of self-seeking that develops into a free society that might approximate anarchy. If modern science wins the game, moral society as we know it will unravel. Polanyi argues that we must not naively believe what this form of science has proposed about freedom without seeing the consequences—an amoral society driven by animal appetites. But is this chess game really playing with the best form of either Christianity or science?

The school children¹ or students² who are being addressed matter; they will be influenced by the winner of the game. Polanyi believes they have received a narrowed form of science—the physical sciences taught by atheistic teachers. Polanyi suggests that the teachers have been reckless, with a form of naive neglect. Following the teacher's victory would ultimately result in losing contact with reality—the collapse of human communal life in a stable form. The stakes are high.

Polanyi knows he plays as the underdog. The modern, suspicious mind has permeated virtually every aspect of life, even in children. The modern person wants to be scientific, but Polanyi challenges this "scientific" attitude. His chess move is to undermine the opponent who promises unfettered freedom and to replace it with a freedom

grounded in social solidity and moral stability. But this move seems to approach a stalemate at the conclusion. The onlookers are likely to reject both science and faith in order to pursue power and a place in the world of economic and materialistic advancement. But that is another story.

Beginning with the opening phrase, this lecture presents Polanyi's interpretation of a tension between Christianity and the Modern Mind. But what if the tension as it exists is between the study of objects and the world of persons—the impersonal vs. the personal? If there were no line in scientific discovery between the natural world and personal, is it possible to develop a common community of explorers who learn a relational way of thinking that attunes us to the world we indwell? The absence of this possibility here leaves us in a competitive game. The free society will need to have science and faith integrated in engaging this world that is physical, biological, personal, and social.

Polanyi's first move examines what we believe about death. He proposes to examine the generally accepted belief *that* all humans must die. But the argument shifts us from the fact of death to look at beliefs concerning *why* people die, moving from a simple observation of datum to taking sides in interpretive stances. We are left feeling we must choose a reasonable theory. But that is not Polanyi's objective. His logical move will sacrifice authority so that no one has a privileged position, neither science nor any of the many faith positions. Everyone believes as they do because of the context in which they are educated. But not all outcomes of belief are the same.

With this move, Polanyi has primarily taken away the power position of modern science, which usually enters the game of interpretation assuming superiority. Everyone is now a pawn in the game. Different traditions simply produce diverse beliefs. "What to believe" is what we were handed as children and no one is privileged with a set of correct beliefs to trump others beliefs.

In this exchange, Polanyi gains a way for all persons to hold beliefs beyond the senses—beliefs are simply an inheritance from one's community, not from experience. But Polanyi has maybe gone one step too far. It is not clear that he has left room for a Christian voice to invite people into a moral society, much less a scientific one. He has not built a framework for confident trust in either science or Christianity.

So far, Polanyi has equalized the game board by investing in the indebtedness of all persons to the beliefs of their community. But there is no one to move his agenda forward on the board to champion a society of explorers who could commit to creating a moral society. Polanyi acknowledges the place of the young scientist and the young Christian standing on equal footing, but they appear on opposite sides of the game. As competitors, there appears no reason for the scientist to collaborate with the Christian, nor for the Christian to work with the scientist. The board is equal, but polarized.

The game with competing belief systems appears to have lost contact with reality. We simply have persons nestled into their community with internally shared theories. Each community envisions a different and self-interested outcome of this game. If a moral community is what is desired, I am not convinced we can ever realize that intended end in this environment of competition. Polanyi has asserted the value of moral society, but has conceded that science will not get us there and I am not convinced we are justified in hoping for more from a Christian believer or community.

In the game Polanyi is playing, we do not end up with any heroes of science put forward, nor any vital Christian leadership. The question we need to ask to achieve Polanyi's goal may not be "what to believe?" but rather "in whom might we believe?" Who is capable of creating an appropriate theory, practice, and community to create a different future? There are good reasons not to trust some scientists; they are only human, and morality is not their focus. But there are some scientists, like Einstein, who appear to be visionary in a transformative exploration in science, including the valuing of a good society. We need to have confidence, not only in what we believe, but in whom we might follow in shaping our beliefs for an appropriate goal as humans.

As described, modern scientific believing gives us no chess moves for working together, only tools for separately achieving the fulfillment of individualistic desires. This was evidenced in the mindset that led to tragic wars and political turmoil where science was used to conquer for immoral ends. That was a game where everyone lost. Science alone cannot provide a moral world in which to live.

Polanyi's game proposes to bridge between science and Christianity, yet it still reveals that there are two teams with different belief systems. In a nutshell, both science and Christianity begin with a game plan (theoretical aspects), but the two communities do not acknowledge commonality in their distinct theories. Based on their theories, each team develops a set of rules to play the game together as a team (confessional aspect), but not with others; their rules are intramural, not extramural. The result is that there are certain players who can enter their game, but they are then excluded from others' games ("believers" belong, nonbelievers are barred).

The situation is such that both science and religion exist as particular cultures with traditions for shaping young intellects *separately*, not to play together. For Polanyi, this means that the free society will require developing a positive relation between science and religion that is based on a common belief that appears to be missing.

Due to the influence of Freud, the developing psychological view has reduced the motive life of humans to animal desires. Consequently, as each person pursues their own interests, the culture fragments and the possibility of being a free society is forfeited. Though not mentioned, Polanyi's hope is sabotaged by a Christianity that traded in morality for influence, as well as those forms of science that became so focused on the objective world that they lost touch with humanity.

The modern world cannot in actuality go back to a unified reality based on a common theory in the modern context. Even belief in reason and justice have been exchanged for indulgence in individual appetites. Confessions that once bound humans together are traded for doubt and self-rule. The community of humanity is unraveling. The good society is fading. The foundation for a moral community appears threatened with diminishing Christian belief, and even this institution has imploded in polarized belief systems we cannot take time to dissect here.

In his lecture, Polanyi placed a lot of hope in Christian theology without specifically addressing its methods or content. If Polanyi had followed Barth, he would have affirmed that proper theology is based on evidence that God exists—especially in the person of Jesus. Instead, Polanyi proposed working with a Christianity based on a belief system as a set of confessions, energized by human faith. But later generations desired another kind of freedom that was not merely theoretical and did not require belonging to a team with constraining practices. They resisted being told what to believe or what they were allowed to discover. Something new was needed.

Renewing community requires appropriate leaders. This has been true in both science and Christianity. We need grandmasters to apprentice younger generations into authentic community, not just religious morality. And if we are going to have authentic Christianity, we need to engage a living God and not merely a shared, theoretical belief system. Polanyi appears to have skipped God and the Bible and focused belief on the church and its traditions. This moral ideal ends up losing contact with reality. Polanyi builds his moral possibility on the will and faith of humans. In confessing and gathering, members of a group merely struggle together by a conscious effort of the will.

Polanyi made a fatal move in pursuing a civic morality in his strategy. This modern ideal lacked players to actualize that goal. Church history demonstrates largely unsuccessful attempts in creating a moral society. At its worst, Christianity has created inquisitions, crusades, and the Dark Ages. At its best, it has created universities, hospitals, art, and great literature. These were valuable, practical outcomes that contributed to society, but did not control the end game. Controlled morality is always problematic as a form of idealism that looks for servants to fulfill its mission.

The idealism of three big players created the modern mindset that Polanyi is facing. They separated science and Christianity, abolishing religion as the means to the ideal. Freud attacked religion as the human projection of an illusion, thereby creating God. His “scientific” alternative created the psychology of individualism. The moral consequence was a default to human desire that lost the cohesion of community. He rejected a false Christianity, but replaced it with a form of “science” that neglected the personal as a way of being together.

Marx critiqued the false economic structures that were supported by Christian suppositions, but were ultimately revealed as an abuse of power. In equalizing the

economic structures, a communism developed that threatened the particularity of persons, resulting in a morality that had tragic consequences. A “science” of economics created an impersonal system held together by power and neglecting human dignity.

Nietzsche unmasked the moral prejudices hidden under Christian presentations of society. Those pursuing goodness were revealed as a threat to society, at play in their “will to power.” His “science” was a sociological critique of false Christianity, but also standing against all who would propose the virtues of morality. This paved the way to skepticism of all reason and shared morality. This left humans exercising a self-serving “will to power” in a meaningless world. This did not serve the field of the personal, nor science, in serving humanity in the complexity of personal existence.

The practiced forms of individualism, communism, and nihilism became destructive of personal knowledge and fulfillment in community. These ideologies created the Modern Mind, and did not fulfill what Polanyi envisioned. They brought damage to fragile forms of Christianity. Polanyi wanted to change the game here, but he did not quite make it.

Instead of setting religion and natural science against one another, or working independently, he needed to see collaboration as the new game. In chess images, that might mean that both “sides” commit to work together in such a way that *all the pawns* become queens. If each person committed to move so as to transform as many of each other’s pawns as possible, a shared win could become the goal. In the end, the game would portray success when the combined set of queens was maximized. Mutual consideration would become the new morality.

Played out in the “science and faith” game, Christian leaders would need to affirm the place of science in studying and caring for persons in the field of the personal *and* the physical. Scientists could affirm Christian thinkers in the science of the personal regarding how we love the world created by God, care for neighbors, and for ourselves. With each empowering the other, all pawns (participants) become queens (maximally empowered for contribution), able to become that community of explorers discovering together what is possible. Working cooperatively, without ideals of morality, contact with changing reality becomes possible. This strategy could develop into a different game plan, with an indeterminate future, within the purposes of a loving God.

For Barth, and later T. F. Torrance building on Polanyi, the reality of God precedes all human confession and theological thinking. Revelation creates the place of focal concreteness within the subsidiary of the world; consequently, we indwell God’s self-giving. This indwelling produces forms of relatedness not natural to the human.³ Within this context, science and faith could form a wise society.

Both scientists and Christians exercise “faith seeking understanding” within their field of knowing. Both are reasonable insofar as their findings actually reflect on the one reality witnessed to within their community. They are equally investigations made

by persons, within traditions, requiring commitment, and developing skills to continue as active discoverers.

Polanyi's insights urge us to belief that makes a difference in the world. For that task, we need the communities of science and faith on the same team. In these rich communities of belief that serve humanity, we need faith as attunement to reality and our beliefs about all its dimensions. Both science and faith can help uncover vast fields of what is to be known. Ignorance of the other, for either discipline, is disastrous.

Polanyi points the way to a conversation between science and Christianity yet to be realized in creating a collaborative future. He is right in assessing the erosion at the base of human belief systems. He opens doors that have yet to be explored in knowing what (and whom) to believe.

ENDOTES

¹Scott and Moleski, (2005, 203, n. 151) suggest that this was given at the Manchester Grammar School, referencing a letter dated May 6, 1947, to Wedgewood that "The school children...have the advantage of not being surprised by anything, so one can seriously discuss with them the more heretical views without any false note of paradoxity." The letter would be subsidiary evidence that children formed the audience.

²The S.C.M. at the top of the lecture notes suggests an older group of students in the Student Christian Movement.

³Torrance (1969, 29-30) affirms Polanyi's position of our relation to reality so "that we are ready to *let it speak for itself..*" (Italics in original).

REFERENCES

- W. T. Scott, W. T. and M. X. Moleski. 2005. *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher*, Oxford: University Press.
- T. F. Torrance. 1969. *Theological Science*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.