



# THE PARTICIPATORY TURN IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF MICHAEL POLANYI

Jacob Sherman and Dale Cannon

The following four essays (two principal essays and their respective responses) together constitute a significant event in the epistemology (methodology) of religious studies, bringing together two independent developments in such a way as to show both how much they have in common and how thoroughly they can benefit from conversation with each other. The first development represents a novel convergence of a number of diverse contemporary trends in studies of religion expressed in the anthology *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Ferrer and Sherman 2009) that have set out to challenge the epistemological dead ends and blind alleys to which modernism has brought these fields of study. The second represents part of the ongoing legacy of scientist-philosopher Michael Polanyi, who set out radically to challenge dominant modernist epistemological assumptions in the natural sciences and throughout our culture in his major philosophical work, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Polanyi 1964), and related publications. Both of these developments bring to light and underscore in field after field how realities become known and realized not through techniques implementing modernity's notion of objectivity (involving detachment and critical suspicion of subjectivity) but rather through manifold modes of drawing near to them through disciplined personal participation, empathy, and indwelling.

Each principal essay along with its response was initially presented at Annual Meetings of the Polanyi Society over two successive years (2011 and 2012). The first, "Polanyi and the Participatory Turn: Reimagining Religious Studies" by Jacob Sherman, now Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, was given in response to an invitation to the editors of *The Participatory Turn* to explore possible convergences (and divergences) between the ideas informing that book and Polanyi's ideas, especially given their surface resemblances. Sherman's essay did this and more, offering a fresh and masterful reprisal of Polanyi's shift from a critical to a post-critical paradigm along with an analysis of how it correlates with Bruno Latour's influential thesis in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Sherman ends by acknowledging Polanyi's thought as an unacknowledged but key influence on the development of his own understanding of the conception of the participatory turn. The second (much shorter) essay, "Polanyi and Participatory Knowing" by Dale Cannon, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Western Oregon University, aims to provide a response to and an assessment of Sherman's essay from the perspective of a seasoned veteran of Polanyi studies.

The second principal essay, "A Polanyian-Participatory Approach to Comparative Study of Religion: *The Questions of King Milinda* and Anselm's *Proslogion* as Two Traditions of Religious Practice" by Dale Cannon, exemplifies an approach to comparative study of religion that is informed in significant measure by Polanyi's epistemology of tacit knowing and theory of meaning. It is offered as a response in kind to Sherman's 2011 essay. The full elaboration of Cannon's approach is given in Dale Cannon's *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Study of Religion* (1996). "All that Heavenly Glory" gives an assessment of Cannon's essay from the perspective of one of the principal authors of *The Participatory Turn*, Jacob Sherman.