POLANYI AND THE PARTICIPATORY TURN: REIMAGINING RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Jacob Sherman

Keywords: Reimagining religious studies, linguistic turn in religious studies, participatory turn in religious studies, *The Participatory Turn*, modernity, tacit knowing, personal participation in knowing, epistemic indwelling, objectivism, objectivity reconceived, emic perspectives reevaluated, critique of normative secularity (as its own form of traditioned reason) within religious studies, enactive model of understanding, non-representational cognition, nature/culture distinction, hybridization, crossed-out-God, Boyle vs. Hobbes controversy, post-critical perspective, fiduciary relating of knower and known, ontological questions about religious phenomena, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Bruno Latour, Owen Barfield, Alva Noë, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, Elanor Rosch

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces and explains the anthology The Participatory Turn *(2009) as a newly emerging methodology in the study of religion, spirituality, and mysticism that is in substantial agreement with the philosophical orientation represented by Michael Polanyi and, most importantly, transcends the epistemological dead ends and blind alleys to which modernism has recently brought these fields of study. The anthology in question advances a methodology to surpass and replace the regnant "Linguistic Turn" in religious studies, among other efforts, which has tried but largely failed to achieve a principled justification for the discipline(s) of religious studies given the predicament of modernity. The author clearly lays out the predicament in the terms of French philosopher of science Bruno Latour's challenging book,* We Have Never Been Modern *(1993). According to Latour, we are heirs to an absolute disjunction between nature and culture (as two putatively ultimate forms of explanation), never to be intermingled, and each disjoined from any admixture of divinity and spirits ("the crossed-out God"). For Latour, these peculiar disjunctions undergird Descartes' infamous bifurcation between subject and object, mind and matter. Latour traces the genesis of these bifurcations to a mid-seventeenth-century political/scientific controversy within the Royal Society in England between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes. Despite the disjunctions prohibiting any intermingling, there have proliferated untold hybrids of culture and nature. These bifurcations have de-legitimized religious studies: how are we to take religious phenomena seriously without reducing them to "either cultural-linguistic byproducts, pseudo-scientific objective experiences, or simple dogmatic assertions of belief"? They don't fit either side of the divide. And the so-called "Linguistic Turn," despite its promise, just gets us stuck in the culture/subjective side. The Participatory Turn is a third way beyond the reduction of religious claims to either nature or society via an enactive understanding of the sacred, co-creative interaction of epistemic faculties with the creative unfolding of reality; human beings*

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

enact or bring forth ontologically rich religious worlds, the creative enaction (vs. representation) of the world through our engagement of the entirety of our persons with it.

The occasion of the Polanyi Society presentation led the author to realize and acknowledge the "tremendous fecundity of Polanyi's thought" in playing a formative role in the creative genesis of his own thinking in all of these matters (he is unsure about Polanyi's contribution to others in his book). Sherman demonstrates that he understands Polanyi's entire enterprise in its own terms. He identifies three aspects of Polanyi's solution to the objectivist double bind of modernity: the epistemic centrality of personal participation, the somatic (bodily) coefficient of knowledge, and the fiduciary and traditioned character of knowledge. He goes on to identify two areas of possible divergence (possible challenges to Polanyi Studies) and two areas in which Polanyi Studies might pose an edifying challenge to Participatory Studies.

Perhaps each needs the clasp and support of the other in his half-blinded staggering towards the light. Perhaps there is not one prison cell, but two: the 'non-objectifying' subjectivity, in which the humanities are immured, and the adjoining cell of subjectless objectivity, where science is locked and bolted; and maybe the first step toward escape for the two prisoners of language is to establish communications with one another. —Owen Barfield (1977), *The Rediscovery of Meaning*

We now see that not only do the scientific and the humanistic both involve personal participation; we see that both also involve an active use of the imagination. —Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch (1975), *Meaning*

Religious studies departments, the orphaned children of universities in which theology once held sway, struggle to explain why their inquiries ought neither to be subsumed under one or another of the social or strict sciences nor yet abandoned altogether. The departments persist, of course, and will continue to do so, both because geopolitical developments in the last decade have conferred a new public relevance on such discussions and also because students continue to register for such classes. Still, the accidental approval of politics and the market only legitimate the discipline in an *ad hoc* manner, leaving it vulnerable to the charge that religious studies lacks a principled reason for its existence. Moreover, this lack of a principled justification is aggravated by the suspicion that religious studies departments—precisely so long as they remain inassimilable to either the social or the physical sciences—are somehow an offense, for they bear witness to the persistent sense that there is something we have to call "religious" in the world, something neither social nor physical but somehow hyperbolically in excess of them both. And, if we speak honestly, I suspect that many if not most of us who get into the study of religion do so precisely because this inassimilable hyperbolic excess fascinates us. How are we to approach this?

From its very beginning, the modern discipline of religious studies has been searching for a way to legitimate itself. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious scholars, chastened by Enlightenment critiques and following in a path opened by Schleiermacher, sought to salvage something of the religious by freeing religious experience from putatively discredited metaphysical frameworks and locating the holy, the sacred, or the numinous within the epistemological subject. More recently, this turn to the subject itself began to seem utterly suspect. An array of critics challenged the supposedly privileged nature of the subject,

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

pointing to its historicity, contingency, cultural and linguistic particularity, or its essentially gendered construction. The subject of modern religious studies and philosophy of religion—this self-conscious, self-reliant, self-transparent, and responsible individual—began to appear all too obviously "metaphysical." Hoping to get beyond the essentialization of the subject, many religious studies scholars adopted new linguistic strategies as a means of exploring human religion. There was something fitting about this religious appropriation of linguistic philosophy, for much of religion consists not in private religious experience or mystical enlightenment but in the public and discursive artifacts and practices of religious texts, parables, rituals, myths, doctrines, creeds, symbols, narratives, festivals, and so forth. In this new scholarly milieu, as Gavin Flood explains (1999), the object of one's inquiry shifts: "rather than subjectivity (belief, cognition, inner states and religious experiences), language and culture, the realm of signs become the locus of inquiry." But, in a very real sense, this linguistic turn only compounds the problem involved with legitimating religious studies, for the linguistic turn proceeds precisely by dissolving the specifically religious into the generically social.

In what follows, I want to suggest that the predicament of contemporary religious studies is not unique but is a corollary of the broader aporetic predicament of modernity itself, which sought to oppose an objective vision of nature to a subjective understanding of human culture. In one influential iteration of modernity, everything has to be explained either by nature or by culture, either by a reduction to physics and biology on the one hand or a reduction to society and language on the other. The problems we have in discussing the real in the study of religion are thus merely the particularly acute manifestations of the problems we face in discussing the real in almost any of our disciplines, but especially in those embattled disciplines we call the humanities. In the middle of the last century, Michael Polanyi already discerned the aporetic character of this opposition between objectivity and our peculiarly social and human ways of knowing, and he sought to escape this situation via a renewed consideration of the personal component of knowledge, especially in its tacit and fiduciary aspects. Recently, in the field of religious studies, a number of us seeking our own means of escape have been brought together under the general banner of what we are calling the participatory turn in the study of religion, spirituality, and mysticism. What is this so-called participatory turn, what is its relation to the thought of Michael Polanyi, and how can it help us escape the dead ends and blind alleys into which much modern religious studies scholarship seems to have fallen?

I am grateful for the invitation from the Polanyi Society that provides the occasion to think about such questions. In order to do so, the first section of this paper turns to Bruno Latour's account of the way modernity has established itself through the reification of the nature/culture distinction—a distinction announced at least as early as the seventeenth-century turn to the subject and arguably exasperated by the linguistic turn of the last century. Having set the context with an account of the modern problematic, in the second section of the paper I consider the way that both the "the participatory turn" and the thought of Michael Polanyi may be seen to support one another in challenging this modern settlement precisely by refusing the stark distinction of nature and culture.

Nature, Culture, and Modernity

Narrating the genesis and character of modernity has become something of a cottage industry and produced a tremendous array of texts, a few of which stand out as exemplary.[1] Analytically, one of the most helpful is French philosopher of science Bruno Latour's 1993 volume, *We Have Never Been Modern*. For Latour, modernity is not defined by the advent of state bureaucracy, scientific experiment, Cartesian

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

foundationalism, or the liberation of curiosity from theological restraint. It is rather defined by the establishment of an absolute dualism between nature and society, accomplished by the elevation of the human subject out of nature and into the now transcendent realm of culture. Many of us, I suspect, are familiar with accounts of modernity that make some such Cartesian or Kantian dualism central to the identity of the modern. What Latour adds to this common story, however, is a strong account of how this modern aspiration to purify the realms of nature and culture both came about and has always been undone by the equally modern aspiration "illicitly" to mix these two realms. Thus modernity is marked not by one but by two fundamentally conflicting practices that Latour calls "purification" and "translation" (1993, 8–12). In purification, moderns seek through experimental and analytic means to construct a nature freed from culture and subjectivity, while in translation (or "hybridization"), moderns bring together these supposedly pure spheres in new hybrid assemblages of nature and culture.

Hybrids, however, remain invisible to modern eyes. Modernity understands itself only in terms of the first procedure of purification. This is the story we all know. Modernity purifies the world; it separates the value spheres of the good, the true, and the beautiful and so frees the world from antique superstition. The earth no longer groans, trees no longer speak, and the heavens dictate neither our moods nor the proper construction of the republic. Nature exists in its pure brute calculability, mute, stupid, and subject to the laws of mechanical necessity. Thus, nature is scoured of any human or personal trace while, for its part, a new Promethean humanity discovers (or invents) itself as utterly free from the constraints of nature. What it means to be modern is to distill finally nature from culture; the discursive from the real; the social, linguistic, and constructed from the natural, material, and given. As one of Latour's interpreters explains, "Modernity tries to purify the world by dissecting it into two utterly opposed realms. On one side we have the human sphere, composed of transparent freedom and ruled by arbitrary and incommensurable perspectives. On the other side we have nature or the external world, made up of hard matters of fact and acting with objective, mechanical precision" (Harman 2009, 57).

The error of premodern peoples, so the story goes, was to believe in a seamless fabric of nature and culture: political arrangements were believed not only to model but also to follow the heavens, and signatures were spread throughout the world of nature—the moon somehow connected to the growing of seeds or to the metal silver, the sun for its part sympathetic to gold, our own bodies and moods composed of the four elements that make up our temperaments—a world of cosmos, psyche and *politeia* all mixed, confused. But moderns, it is said, put an end to this confusion. According to Latour, "[They] have cut the Gordian knot with a well-honed sword. The shaft is broken: on the left, they have put knowledge of things; on the right, power and human politics" (1993, 3).

As Latour develops his account, he shows that the modern process of purification is a bit more complex still. Modernity separates—horizontally as it were—nature from culture, but it also vertically separates nature and culture from divinity and spirits, a divinity that is now crossed out because it is incapable of ever appearing within a world entirely divided between nature and culture. Latour writes, "Modernity arises first from the conjoined creation of these three entities [exclusive humanity, nonhuman nature, and the crossed-out God], and then from the masking of the conjoined birth and the separate treatment of the three communities while, underneath, hybrids continue to multiply as an effect of this separate treatment" (1993, 13). Modernity is thus seen to be premised upon a double process of separation: humans from nonhumans and above from below. I will say more about this crossed-out God a bit later, but let us linger for a moment more on the horizontal separation. What are the practical consequences of this divide?

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

One familiar consequence is the way that modern universities now map this putative duality of preexisting ontological zones—the natural and the cultural, science and society, fact and value—by dividing our faculties of science from our faculties of the arts. We do not often enough remark on just how novel this division is. When, for example, Gregory XI's 1231 bull *Parens Scientiarum* established the right of universities to regulate themselves, the division of the faculties was entirely different: the major division was the separation of the inferior arts of the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy) from the superior arts of law, medicine, and theology (D'Costa 2005). Five hundred years later, when the University of Berlin was founded in 1810, this first of the modern research universities had yet to institutionalize the arts versus sciences divide. Instead, the University of Berlin divided its faculties into Philosophy, Medicine, Law, and Theology (although the latter was controversial and made it into the university only through Schleiermacher's creative argument that theology was necessary for professional training in a state that still regarded clergy as essential) (D'Costa 2005). Faculties of Science as separate from faculties of Philosophy only began to spread in the late nineteenth century before finally exploding into something akin to their current popularity during the early twentieth.

An even more important consequence than this late division of the faculties, however, is the way that the ontological purification of human from nonhuman realms legitimated the divide between the scientific and the sociopolitical in rhetoric and, as it were, common sense. Following the extraordinary work of Shapin and Schaeffer, Latour explores the genesis of this divide through a consideration of the conflict between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes over Boyle's efforts to establish scientific experiment (rather than logic and mathematics) as the guarantee of scientific truth. We remember Hobbes for his 1651 work, *Leviathan*, in which he sought to overcome the inherently conflictual character of a differentiated social body. Based on Hobbes's vision of the basic agonism and selfishness of the state of nature, he argued that the only rational means for the preservation of order was for citizens to contract with a central, sovereign power in order to bestow upon it a monopoly on both law and violence. This Hobbesian theory established the basic coordinates and vocabulary of modern political philosophy, arguably making Hobbes the father of modern politics. And, for Hobbes, politics is everything. The social power of the Leviathan becomes the medium through which all other arrangements—including the scientific and the religious—are to be understood.

We remember Boyle, on the other hand, as the father of modern chemistry, the inventor of Boyle's Law (that the absolute pressure and volume of a gas are inversely proportional), and the man who institutionalized the scientific method. Boyle established both the scientific priority of matters of fact and that experimental practice ought to be the basis of knowledge. Boyle and Hobbes had much in common. Both men felt the need to secure social order and consent in the Restoration Period following the English Civil War. Moreover, both men addressed themselves to questions that we now think of as belonging either to the natural or to the social sciences. That we remember Hobbes only for his politics and Boyle only for his science is, Latour claims, a mark of our own modernity—a modernity that Boyle and Hobbes helped to create.

Despite their similarities, the two men found themselves deeply at odds. Hobbes greatly mistrusted Boyle's efforts for two reasons. In the first place, he had a formal objection: Boyle's experimental method replaced *episteme* (apodictic knowledge) with *doxa* (opinion) by hitching scientific progress to the shaky testimony of the senses. Boyle sought to build scientific consensus by demonstrating his experiments with the air pump in front of other gentlemen scholars ("credible, trustworthy, well-to-do witnesses") who could subsequently testify about what they had seen, even if they could give no theoretical explanation of its true

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

causes (Latour 1993, 18). In other words, Boyle took the juridical paradigm of testimony as a model for the legitimation of the new scientific modes of knowledge. Hobbes held that this approach would only foment the divisions that always threatened to wreck society. "After Hobbes has reduced and reunified the Body Politic," writes Latour, "along comes the Royal Society to divide everything up again; some gentlemen proclaim the right to have an independent opinion, in a closed space, the laboratory, over which the state has no control" (1993, 20).

In the second place, Hobbes harbored a substantive objection: Boyle's study of gases relied heavily on his construction of the air pump, but Boyle's experiments with this device had introduced the intolerable notion of a vacuum, a notion offensive to Hobbes and other *plenists* because it involved the concept of an immaterial body. Hobbes's entire project of political unification required the elimination of anything like an immaterial body—indeed, any spooky entities at all, whether phantoms, souls, or even God—to which the populace might appeal over and against the judgments of the sovereign as the public and absolute representative of contractually secure civil power. In other words, for Hobbes's new rational political order to succeed, God and all manner of spirits had to be crossed out, nature disenchanted, and the world mechanized, purified, and made rational. If, however, one were to permit these new scientists to produce their own matters of fact within their private laboratories and to populate the world with immaterial entities all over again, then civil war was certain to perpetually return. Hobbes strove to unify knowledge and power in the representative figure of the sovereign, but Boyle's methods threatened to disperse and privatize knowledge—this despite Boyle's aim for consensus—thus making available to every pocket of rebellion new chaotic courts of appeal, i.e., new disorganized sources of power that could be mobilized against the state.

In the controversy between Boyle and Hobbes over the air pump, Boyle succeeded in crushing Hobbes's program to reform the sciences and in orchestrating Hobbes's expulsion from the Royal Society. Hobbes was thus relegated to the status of a social and political philosopher rather than a natural philosopher, and in this way the distinction between the natural and the social sciences as essentially ordered to ontologically different objects of study was established. In the aftermath of this conflict, we remember Boyle for inventing the modern language of scientific representation achieved through experimental methods and the observation of trustworthy scholars, while we remember Hobbes for inventing the modern language of political representation through social contract, citizenship, and the sovereign, whether monarch or government.

Shapin and Schaeffer (1985, 110–154) read this episode as ironically vindicating Hobbes's understanding of the world. They say that Boyle is able to achieve his new scientific consensus only by mobilizing vast resources of human power—the gentlemen witnesses, the technological artifacts, the rarefied atmosphere of the laboratory, the literary and social networks of the Royal Society—and so Hobbes is correct in his fundamental claim that knowledge remains power. But Latour sees Schaeffer and Shapin's Hobbesian conclusion as all too modern, for it is only in the wake of the air pump controversy that we believe nature and society to be essentially distinct. Shapin and Schaeffer seek, in constructivist manner, to explain the deliverances of science by reference to society, but a still more careful study of Boyle and Hobbes would show that it is not enough to explain Boyle's truths of nature by reference to the sociopolitical context in which they are elicited, for the sociopolitical realm stands in equal need of explanation. Only after society and nature are separated and purified can one be identified as the cause of the other.

Modernity is the paradoxical state of being stuck in the shuttle between these two putatively ultimate forms of explanation. We explain society by reference to the "impersonal" and "natural" forces that science discovers. But we also, now in late modernity more than ever, come to understand the ideological

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

underpinnings of science and nature as either sociology or sociobiology. Latour, however, insists that this entire shuttle is illusory. Nature and culture are not explanatorily basic because they are not givens; the very idea that they are unproblematically there in the first place is what needs to be explained.

Modernity is able to treat nature and culture as unproblematically given only by systematically ignoring their relationship to one another. This systematic ignorance is achieved through what Latour calls the three guarantees of the modern constitution. First, nature precedes humanity; it has always existed; it transcends us and therefore what scientists do in their laboratories is not the fabrication of facts but the discovery of secrets. Second, society is entirely created by human beings; it is our free action; we and we alone determine our destiny. Modernity is divided in this way between, on the one hand, a reading of the world according to the canons of reductionism and empirical necessity and, on the other, a sequestered space for the preservation of human freedom and values—a modern vision that Foucault named the figure of Man as "an empirico-transcendental doublet" (2002, 318–322). But these two guarantees are unstable. If nature is as transcendent as the first guarantee describes, then it is forever out of our reach, threatening, hostile. And if society is only what we make it, how do we secure sovereignty and order? This conflict is only overcome by a third guarantee that insists,

> [T]here shall exist a complete separation between the natural world (constructed, nevertheless, by man) and the social world (sustained, nevertheless, by things); secondly, there shall exist a total separation between the work of hybrids and the work of purification. The first two guarantees are contradictory only as long as the third does not keep them apart forever, as long as it does not turn an overly patent symmetry into two contradictory asymmetries that practice resolves but can never express. (Latour 1993, 31)

Finally, there is a fourth guarantee. This is the theological guarantee of the "crossed-out God." In order to shore up the modern constitution, it was necessary that God be excluded from intervening in any way in the formation of the modern order while at the same time being completely available to legitimate this order. "No one," says Latour, "is truly modern who does not agree to keep God from interfering with Natural Law as well as with the laws of the Republic." But if God had disappeared entirely, leaving only the twin forces of nature and society, then the aporetic character of this settlement would have been felt too strongly; its paradoxes would have appeared all too obvious. The futility of nature and society hanging stupidly in the void would have left moderns orphaned and alone, so, as Nietzsche did before him, Latour points to the way that the crossed-out God serves the modern order by legitimating it on the one hand and maintaining an infinite distance on the other. One ignores God when practicing science and politics only to invoke God when justifying them. Latour explains:

> Modern men and women could thus be atheists even while remaining religious. They could invade the material world and freely re-create the social world, but without experiencing the feeling of an orphaned demiurge abandoned by all. …Spirituality was reinvented: the all-powerful God could descend into men's heart or hearts without intervening in any way in their external affairs. (1993, 33)

Nature, Society, and God: the power of modernity lies in its ability to mobilize these three putatively "pure" forms against one another and against any nature-culture that would try to escape from modernity.

© 2024 by the Polanyi Society

Modernity thus becomes inevitable, the only game in town. By setting these peculiar pieces in play, modernity makes itself invincible.

> If you criticize them by saying that Nature is a world constructed by human hands, they will show you that it is transcendent, that science is a mere intermediary allowing access to Nature, and that they keep their hands off. If you tell them that we are free and our destiny is in our own hands, they will tell you that Society is transcendent and its laws infinitely surpass us. If you object that they are being duplicitous, they will show you that they never confuse the Laws of Nature with imprescriptible human freedom. If you believe them and direct your attention elsewhere, they will take advantage of this to transfer thousands of objects from Nature into the social body while procuring for this body the solidity of natural things. If you turn round suddenly, as in the children's game 'Mother, may I?', they will freeze, looking innocent, as if they hadn't budged: here, on the left, are things themselves; there, on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking subjects, values and of signs. (Latour 1993, 37)

What are these moderns doing behind our backs, everywhere, and all the time? They are creating the "hybrids" whose very existence they deny: "frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales fitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on…" (Latour 1993, 49). What Donna Haraway (1991) calls "cyborgs" and "tricksters," these nature-culture assemblages proliferate in modernity precisely because they are unanalyzable, unthinkable. "Everything happens in the middle," writes Latour, "everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns" (1993, 37). Like the personal unconscious, what is pressed into our societal unconscious often returns to us as fate.[2] Believing that the social order is utterly distinct from the natural, we moderns behave as if nothing we do to the one could truly affect or ruin the other, and yet we live in a world where modernity's unacknowledged hybrids proliferate at an unimaginable speed. Gods and monsters are everywhere but they no longer frighten us, no longer take our breath away, because we pretend not to see them.

The Participatory Turn

Why am I telling you this? What does any of it have to do with religious studies? The problem that concerns many of us in religious studies is precisely the question of whether it is possible to take spirituality, mysticism, and religious worlds seriously today without reducing them to either cultural-linguistic by-products, pseudo-scientific objective experiences, or simple dogmatic assertions of belief. We are, in other words, stuck in between Latour's crossed-out God and the competing explanations of nature and society. How can we take seriously those things that remain hyperbolically in excess of both nature and culture; things that are neither exclusively natural nor cultural but both at the same time and yet, still, somehow more; the very things that make religious studies suspect in the *modern* academy?

When Jorge Ferrer and I wrote the programmatic introduction to our 2009 volume, *The Participatory Turn*, we opened with a discussion of the problems that a strong version of the linguistic turn generates for religious studies scholarship. Focusing on the linguistic turn made sense, for this has been the prevailing

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

theoretical climate within religious studies for some time. But the linguistic turn can be seen as merely a new chapter in the broader story that Latour narrates. The linguistic turn names a shift within the focus of inquiry from the epistemic to the semantic, from the inner representations and innate categories of the modern subject to the analysis of the elements of language, speech-acts, conditions for a theory of meaning, the relationship between words and world-affairs, and so forth. While intending to move beyond the reified interior spaces of the Cartesian-Kantian subject, the linguistic turn—just as surely as its predecessor, the turn to the subject—dwells entirely on the society side of the nature-society divide that Latour has described. Under the aegis of the linguistic turn, the object of religious studies and the philosophy of religion is no longer the elucidation of the origin, nature, or ontological implications of religious tradition, experience, and the world in its own self-transcending but is rather the analysis, interpretation, or critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the textual, the linguistic, and the symbolic. In this sense, much modern philosophy of religion can be seen as advancing the process of the linguistification of the sacred, a process that is central to the early Habermas's description of the modern era (1984). To "linguistify" the sacred means to evacuate it of its once transcendental authority—an authority vouchsafed by God or the heavens or some other such religious reality—and to bring the legitimization of its cognitive and normative claims down into the *purely human sphere*, the cultural, the intersubjective space constituted by communicative exchanges among rational human beings. For Habermas, the linguistification of the sacred is simply an aspect of the secularization of the sacred, the crossing-out of God that seems to be part and parcel of the modern constitution.[3]

In the supposedly disenchanted world of modernity/postmodernity, the sacred has been detranscendentalized, relativized, contextualized, and diversified but, most fundamentally, assimilated to human linguistic expression. The effects of this have been widespread and can be discerned within many of the diverse topoi of contemporary religious studies: the currency of "language games" and "forms of life" approaches within Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion, the demise of classic foundationalism, the conceptual framework approach to understanding religious diversity, the interpretation of mysticism as a particular form of apophatic speech, and so forth. To repeat, what is most conspicuous about all of this is the way such approaches confine religion to a linguistified corner of the society side of the nature-society shuttle that problematically constitutes modernity.

I now think that Ferrer and I may have somewhat oversold the hegemony of the linguistic turn in contemporary religious studies, for it is also true that partisans of the science or nature side of the modern divide have sought to offer their own reductive explanations of religious phenomena, and they seem to be pressing these cases with increasing vigor. Moving beyond the social-scientific naturalism of a previous generation of scholars such as Robert Segal, Russell McCutcheon, Donald Wiebe, or J. Samuel Preus, the cognitive science of religion takes an even more strictly naturalist and reductionist approach to the explanation of religion and its persistence. Scholars working in this field seek to explain (or explain away) the acquisition and continuance of religion by reference to the sorts of explanations offered in evolutionary psychology and sociobiology.[4] Thus, for example, religion is seen an evolutionary spandrel (Atran 2002), a consequence of the brain's hazard-precaution system (Boyer 2001), or the brain's Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) (Barrett 2004).[5] What is distinctive about these approaches is the way they seek fully to occupy the nature side of modernity's nature-culture divide even, or especially, when dealing with activities taken to be religious.

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

To speak of a participatory turn in religious studies, as Ferrer and I and our collaborators have done, is to speak of an emerging academic ethos that refuses to be confined by either of modernity's two "prison cells"—what Owen Barfield describes as "the 'non-objectifying' subjectivity, in which the humanities are immured, and the adjoining cell of subjectless objectivity, where science is locked and bolted" (1977, 160). We do not claim to be inventing this alternative ethos but see ourselves rather as drawing attention to a hitherto diffuse set of trends, scholarly approaches, and sensibilities that, taken together, suggest a movement decisively beyond modernity's confines. In making our case for the participatory turn, we sought to identify seven important themes within religious studies and the academy at large that contributed to this movement: (1) the postcolonial revaluation of *emic* epistemological frameworks (that is to say, an epistemology as experienced *from within* as opposed to an *etic* view, which would be a description *from without*); (2) the postmodern and feminist emphasis on embodiment and sacred immanence; (3) the resacralization of language; (4) the "pragmatic turn" in contemporary philosophy; (5) the renewed interest in the study of lived spirituality; (6) the question of religious truth in postmetaphysical thinking; and (7) the irreducibility of religious pluralism.

Readers interested in a full description of how we approach these movements are invited to consult the text itself, but, by way of illustration, it may help to consider one of them for a moment. The first movement we identified as the "postcolonial revaluation of emic epistemological frameworks." There are a host of factors involved in this reevaluation, some of which are more theoretical, such as the postmodern critique of the ontotheological nature of contemporary Western thought, and some of which are more ethical, such as the feminist articulation of standpoint epistemologies and the postcolonial critique of the putative superiority of the Western rational subject and its ties to a politics of domination. Of course, even this tendency to speak of these as either theoretical or ethical may be considered part of the problem. The basic issue raised in all of these approaches is a concern that the language and epistemic categories that emerge from Western scientific and philosophical traditions may be inadequate and even destructive when it comes to the analysis of knowledge claims from other cultures, diverse ways of knowing, and claims about nonmodern domains of reality.

Although we failed to say anything about this in the book, the reevaluation of emic epistemologies might be read as a critique of normative secularity within religious studies. In the heyday of the secularization thesis, much of religious studies saw itself (as many in the cognitive science of religion still do) as involved in the task of explaining away religious behaviors and phenomena. In Hobbesian fashion, the *socius* was treated as explanatorily basic, and religion—prayer, bhakti, ritual and liturgical celebration, and so forth—was therefore regarded as always being a response to a lack and never as an affirmative human behavior in itself. However, once the immanent frame of secularity is revealed as its own form of traditioned reason, then the formal *de jure* prohibition against emic epistemological frameworks is rendered suspect.[6]

Needless to say, this reevaluation of emic frameworks does not intend to re-enthrone one or another of the hegemonic theologies that governed the academy in the past. Rather, this reevaluation can be seen as part of the spread of new spiritual options, the arrival of which, rather like Latour's hybrids, surprises our putatively secular modernity.[7]

Accordingly, in reconsidering emic viewpoints, scholars of religious studies are not reinscribing one or another theology as the final arbiter of knowledge or religious experience, nor are they returning to a time when science would be subject to religious authority. The point in reevaluating emic perspectives is simply that Western ways of knowing may not serve as the ultimate or most effective judges when evaluating claims

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

of religious knowledge, especially those that arise from enduring, communal practices of formation.[8] As Richard King notes in *Orientalism and Religion*, "[It] is not that Western scholars should necessarily accept the emic perspectives over which they are claiming the authority to speak, but rather that they at least entertain the possibility that such perspectives are a legitimate stance to adopt and engage them in constructive debate" (1999, 183). Reevaluating emic epistemologies, in other words, does not entail claims of epistemic or linguistic incommensurability, as if each person or religious community were stuck within the parameters of its inherited grammar, somewhat akin to the early cultural-linguistic theory of George Lindbeck (2009). This would only be to confine us within a kind of linguistic cage and so condemn us to remain entirely within the society side of Latour's divide. The point in reevaluating these emic epistemological approaches, by contrast, is instead to consider the way they might meet the accessibility conditions of certain phenomena that modern epistemologies remain incapable of perceiving. In other words, alternative epistemologies need to be reconsidered not as cultural artifacts or grammatical prescriptions but as possible doors of perception.

For each of the seven trends we identified, we tried in a similar manner to show how they successfully provide a means beyond the explanatory omnicompetence of the linguistic turn and so reacquaint us with genuine ontological questions about religious phenomena. The participatory turn thus sees itself as inspired by the postmodern and pragmatic concerns with the renewed interest in different ways of knowing (embodied, gendered, imaginal, contemplative, and so forth), the new attention given to the self-implicating study of spirituality and mystical transformation, and the increasing willingness to consider emic understandings without falling into either uncritical confessional stances or the reductionistic essentialisms and universalisms of most classical approaches. The participatory turn thus seeks a third way beyond the reduction of religious claims to either nature or society.

In seeking this third way, we have argued for an enactive understanding of the sacred, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as cocreated events. In Latour's vocabulary, the participatory approach sees religious worlds and experiences as hybrids. Phenomena such as the Kabbalistic four realms, the various Buddhist cosmologies, or Teresa's seven mansions do not exist independently of human beings, but neither are they generated out of some reservoir of transcendental freedom. Instead, the participatory approach argues that such religious phenomena arise through an interaction of the entire range of human epistemic faculties (e.g., rational, imaginal, somatic, psychosemantic, and so forth) with the creative unfolding of reality, including reality in its own hyperbolic transcendence. Certainly, religious worlds are in one sense brought forth from within us, but this "within" is never entirely our own, for it is given to us from the world to which we belong. As Barfield puts it, "It was not man who made the myths, but the myths, or the archetypal substance they reveal, which made man" (1977, 75).

A key notion for understanding the participatory turn is enactment: we argue that in multidimensional cognition human beings enact—or "bring forth"—ontologically rich religious worlds.[9] The term "enaction" is borrowed from the biocognitive model of Humberto Maturana, especially as later developed by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch.[10] For Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *enaction* refers to a nonrepresentational form of cognition that brings forth a domain of distinctions as the result of the mutual interrelation of an organism and its environment. Knowing is not the representation of a pre-given world of objects but the creative enaction of the world through our engagement with it. As Alva Noë explains, perception is "a dynamic activity of skillful interaction with things around us. Perceiving isn't representing, or even presenting; it is enacting perceptual content—that is to say, making contact with the world through skillful exercise" (Noë 2005, 249).

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

For Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, this interaction is limited to the sensorimotor domain, but one can extend this model to include a much wider swathe of reality as thinkers such as Noë have already begun doing. For Noë, it is not one part of the human being that perceives—the eye, for example, or the brain—but the entirety of the person.[11] When we engage the entirety of our persons in knowing reality, we touch or make contact with the world through the complex coordination of our bodies, minds, spirits, and all of the powers of which they consist. This is true of quotidian knowledge but true also of the various sorts of knowing employed in broadly religious or contemplative endeavors. Accordingly, in the Christian tradition, Aquinas is able to define contemplation not as a rationalistic achievement but rather as a species of touch, "a simple *intuition* of the divine truth."[12] For the Christian, contemplative knowing is not an operation of the head alone but of the whole person, and so the Hesychasts of Mount Athos associate contemplation with the heart, the seat of human personhood. The American monk Thomas Merton makes a similar point: "We meditate with our mind, which is 'part of' our being. But we contemplate with our whole being and not just with one of its parts."[13] Why does Merton hold that we must contemplate with our whole being? Because we see in contemplation—as we also love in relationships—only as the entirety of who we are is transformed, caught up, and received again. This transformation is part of the event itself, even if the divinizing of contemplation is in no way reducible to our action. Here, the duality of subject and object of experience does not hold, for our participation in the contemplative event is part of its condition of possibility, but the contemplative event also refashions the contemplative self so that the contemplative only really receives herself in this very event of contemplation.

How do we make sense of this? If, as the enactive model argues, all perception has the character of a probe—which is to say that it receives only by inserting itself into the world that it also perceives—then we are not entitled to speak of perceived religious worlds as merely semantically or socially constructed.[14] Instead, our acts of knowing must be seen as part of the real world they also touch. Human *poeisis*, language use, and creative historical activity elicit the world's disclosure even as they themselves participate in and add to the world that is disclosed. What we are suggesting, in other words, is that multidimensional acts of knowing be treated as real, objective, artisanal interactions with the world and with that which various religions hold as existing beyond (though not in opposition to) the publically observable order of physical objects. The plurality of religious disclosures is, on this account, not a result of competing epistemological frameworks but of the way that our individual and social comportment—our personal and interpersonal participation—is able to engage with the world and with the transcendence that haunts the world in order to elicit a variety of ontologically rich religious domains.

Personal Participation and Michael Polanyi

Thinking through these matters again, it now seems to me that the name of Michael Polanyi is conspicuous in its absence not only from the seven emerging themes we identified as paving the way for the participatory turn but even from the index of the entire volume. I am happy to take the opportunity now to correct this oversight and to give credit where credit is due. For even though Polanyians may have their concerns about *our* project, we owe it to *them* to identify Polanyi as a crucial precursor to the participatory approach. I have not queried my collaborators about this, but I can say, for my part, that Polanyi's thought played a formative role in the creative genesis of my own thinking in all of these matters. Indeed, one of Polanyi's chief virtues seems to be the tremendous fecundity that his thought elicits in his readers. I suspect

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

this has to do with the permission that so many of us first received from Polanyi to understand philosophy as a passionate and critical means of engaging with a real world.

The similarities between Polanyi and the participatory model are likely already apparent to readers of this essay, but by means of conclusion I will rehearse a few of them before finally suggesting a couple of areas in which participatory thinkers may want to challenge Polanyians, as well as two areas in particular in which I think Polanyians may bring a quite legitimate case against us.

The predicament that convinced Polanyi to turn from chemistry to philosophy and the study of society was, in his terms, the problem of objectivism. Objectivism, or what is often called scientism, consists in the modernist claim that we can only know that which we approach in a purely detached, skeptical, and objective manner. Perhaps even more than Latour, Polanyi was horrified at the polarization this created between the objective sciences that understood themselves to be dealing with matters of fact and the subjective world of culture (made of C. P. Snow's "literary intellectuals") that increasingly saw itself as unmoored from any transcendent or realist grounding (Snow 1993). Polanyi's horror was motivated by the political consequences that he saw as issuing from this epistemological separation. By submerging the human side of knowing in a sea of shifting values and elective affinities, Polanyi thought that the Western world was increasingly paving the way for the kind of nihilism and totalitarianism that overtook the Eastern bloc for most of the twentieth century.[15]

The problem Polanyi identifies throughout his works is akin to the problem identified by Latour and by participatory theorists: the interpolation of a gulf between nature and culture such that the two are now regarded as utterly, even ontologically distinct realms, one subject to mechanical necessity and the other to a kind of voluntaristic (ultimately empty) freedom. The culture side of the nature-culture divide is incapable of resisting the reductionisms of science precisely because it has already conceded to science the purview of truth. For this reason, the freedom preserved within culture and the "social" sciences can only be a kind of nihilistic freedom precisely because culture remains the realm of human persons, but the truth of human persons is finally determined by the objectivist and reductionist inquiries of science.[16] Everything, from life to Shakespeare's sonnets to Kant's first *Critique*, is therefore to be explained solely by reference to the ultimate determination of atomic forces and nomological regularities. As Polanyi writes,

> The ideal of science remains what it was in the time of Laplace: to replace all human knowledge of atoms in motion. …It is simply this sort of mechanical reductionism that is the heart of the matter. It is this that is the origin of the whole scientific obscurantism under which we are suffering today. This is why we corrupt the conception of man, reducing him to an insentient automaton or to a bundle of appetites. This is why science denies us the possibility of acknowledging personal responsibility. This is why science can be invoked in support of totalitarianism violence. Why science has become, as I have said before, the greatest source of dangerous fallacies today. (*M*, 25)

Like participatory thinkers, Polanyi sought a means to escape from the objectivist double bind of modernity.[17] Three aspects of his solution to this predicament may be highlighted as especially important for those of us concerned with the participatory turn: (1) the epistemic centrality of personal participation, (2) the somatic component of knowledge, and (3) the fiduciary character of knowledge.

First, in highlighting *the epistemic centrality of personal participation*, Polanyi sought to break entirely with the modernist ideal of knowledge as an impersonal and objective affair. Critical thought seeks both to

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

distinguish and to distance the knower from the known, but Polanyi sees his project as post-critical. Post-critical philosophy out-narrates its competitors by demonstrating the way in which even the putatively objective deliverances of science rely on tacit and personal acts of knowing and accreditation. Modernist paradigms of thought are only rendered plausible because they ignore the role of discovery in science and so focus purely on the formal extension of already known laws and empirically measurable observations. The great drama and the great appeal of science, however, lies precisely in the realm of discovery, the frontier science that does more than provide us with further details about the world we already know but rather discloses those bizarre and beautiful sides of the world about which we previously had no idea. Again and again, throughout *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi points to the way that discovery proceeds through the imagination to the uncovering of the implications, structures, patterns, meanings, and so forth that constitute our subjective connection to the objective but "hidden" lawfulness of the world. As Polanyi writes, "We now see that not only do the scientific and the humanistic both involve personal participation; we see that both also involve an active use of the imagination" (*PK*, 64).

We come to know the world through these integral, imaginal acts of personal participation or indwelling. One of Polanyi's ways of addressing this participatory aspect is to speak of the "tacit dimension" in both scientific and everyday knowing. Tacit knowledge issues from the recognition that "we know more than we can tell" (*TD*, 4). The fact that we possess knowledge in excess of our ability to render it semantically is an embarrassment to both sides of the nature-culture divide, for it attributes real knowledge to acts that are anything but objective or detached. As process philosophers and phenomenologists alike had already noted, our conscious, abstract forms of attention supervene on deeper, more pervasive and primary forms of tacit knowing. It is not only the case that we know more than we can tell but also that "we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell" (*PK*, x).

Tacit knowledge involves two levels: the focal awareness of the whole on the one hand, which Polanyi calls the *molar* level, and a subsidiary awareness of individual components on the other, which Polanyi calls the *molecular*. As finite creatures, we come to know anything initially through coming to know it subsidiarily through its parts and aspects. However, were we to stop with this subsidiary knowledge of parts, we would never in fact know anything at all, for we would never reach the whole, the *unum*—that is, the comprehensive being itself.[18] Happily, our knowing always entails something more, a leap beyond the mere juxtaposition of parts into the tacit or focal integration of these parts as disclosive of the unified entity as holistically known. Our tacit integration of the parts is subjective but not relativistic; this tacit, subjective integration is guided by the vectors we trace in the pattern of the molecular parts we know in subsidiary awareness. The knower feels her way into the whole that lures and precedes her. Subsidiary awareness is, as it were, the call to which focal awareness is the proffered response. Put otherwise, all our knowing involves an imaginative or subjective dilation of particulars in order to disclose the integral, partially hidden reality before us.[19] Through this personal supplement alone, the world reveals itself as both intelligible and meaningful.

In the second place, closely related to this first personal or tacit component, participatory thinkers will resonate will Polanyi's insistence on the *somatic coefficient of knowledge*. Polanyi distinguishes between the bodily and the conceptual aspects of knowing, but he maintains that they cannot be divided. He thus draws regular attention to the embodied component of our cognitive activities—from the coordination of the body to its environment via balance, to the constant background activity involved in perception, to the motor skills involved in speech—all of which must be skillfully if tacitly deployed in order for us to rightly

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

engage in the integral act of knowing. The relation of the somatic to the conceptual can be seen as a further iteration or higher octave of what we have already met between the subsidiary and the focal. The body occupies an epistemologically unique place within the cosmos.

> [T]he way the body participates in the act of perception can be generalized further to include the bodily roots of all knowledge and thought. Our body is the only assembly of things known almost exclusively by relying on our awareness of them for attending to something else. Parts of our body serve as tools for observing objects outside and for manipulating them. Every time we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts. (*KB*, 147)[20]

There is an intentionality in the way the body knows. Knowledge moves *from* our bodily awareness *to* the objective or intelligible world that surrounds, sustains, and buoys our bodily existence.

This vectoral character of knowledge—its from-to structure—means that we are always personally involved in that which we know. In order to know, we must indwell things, and it is worth pausing for a moment over these powers of indwelling, for they somewhat complicate our usual understanding of the body. Our bodies are the paradigm of indwelling; this is what makes them cosmically unique. We attend from our bodies to the intelligible world to which our bodies introduce us. We know our bodies as our own because we indwell them, but our bodies do not describe the limits of such indwelling. Through intentionality, we become capable of dilating our indwelling to encompass the tools we use. Indeed, there is a sense in which we incorporate the tools we employ—the glasses through which I see, the cane the blind man uses to feel his route, the brush of an artist—through all of these media and so many more, we extend our attention into the world beyond the skin-encapsulated limits of our empirical bodies. We might even describe Polanyi's account of the body as ecstatic or transcorporeal, insofar as the body is always capable of further dilations in its disclosure of the world (Sherman 2023, 424).

Nor is this transcorporeal extension of bodily indwelling limited to material media. Language itself, as Polanyi demonstrates in his account of the intellectual passions, is a tool through which we extend ourselves into the world beyond our corporeal frame. In this way, Polanyi's account of language moves decisively beyond the transcendentalism that beleaguers so many variants of the linguistic turn. Far from a transcendental cage keeping one from the world, language as indwelt becomes a means of extending oneself beyond the dimensions of the empirical body into a world of limitless intelligibility. This applies not only to language proper but to all of our viable "articulate frameworks." As Polanyi writes, "A valid articulate framework may be a theory, or a mathematical discovery, or a symphony. Whichever it is, it will be used by dwelling in it, and this indwelling can be consciously experienced" (*PK*, 208). In its religious iterations, at its highest pitch, personal indwelling can dilate into a kind of cosmic or even mystical scale:

> The religious mystic achieves contemplative communion as a result of an elaborate effort of thought, supported by ritual. By concentrating on the presence of God, who is beyond all physical appearances, the mystic seeks to relax the intellectual control which his powers of perception instinctively exercise over the scene confronting them. His fixed gaze no longer scans each object in its turn and his mind ceases to identify their particulars. The whole framework of intelligent understanding, by which he normally appraises his impressions,

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

> sinks into abeyance and uncovers a world experienced uncomprehendingly as a divine miracle. (*PK*, 210)

Instead of a flight from the alone to the Alone, or an ascetic and impersonal detachment from the world, Polanyi's account of the mystic's knowledge raises the personal coefficient of knowledge to almost infinite degree. He notes that "the impersonality of intense contemplation consists in a complete participation of the person in that which he contemplates and not in his complete detachment from it, as would be the case in an ideally objective observation…" (*PK*, 209).

As I have argued elsewhere, building on Polanyi, we might understand such mystical knowing as the forging of something like a *contemplative body* (Sherman 2023). What commentators often mistake for contemplative detachment instead entails the holistic consolidation of all that we usually attend to focally—all the diverse elements of ordinary awareness. All of these are not so much dismissed as rendered subsidiary so that the contemplative might be free to attend *from* them to the hyperbolically excessive horizon of the world—to that which, in the old formulation of Aquinas, all people call God. As Polanyi puts it, the contemplative endeavors "through a succession of 'detachments,' to seek in absolute ignorance union with Him who is beyond all being and all knowledge. We see things then not focally, but as part of a cosmos, as features of God" (*PK*, 209).

Finally, in the third place, Polanyi draws our attention to the *fiduciary and traditioned character of knowledge*. Considered apart from Polanyi's account of the personal and somatic coefficients of knowledge, his insistence on the Augustinian and Anselmian paradigm of faith seeking understanding might seem to lead to precisely the sort of retreat into fideism that participatory thinkers are eager to avoid. Polanyi admits as much, writing of his position, "It threatens to sink into subjectivism: for by limiting himself to the expression of his own beliefs, the philosopher may be taken to talk only about himself" (*PK*, 209). But this would be the case only if Polanyi's thought were read in an arguably pre-critical rather than post-critical manner. What makes Polanyi's fiduciary program post-critical is precisely that his recuperation of the role of faith in knowledge is based not on the arbitrary assertion of one community's epistemic privilege but rather on an understanding of the from-to structure of tacit and personal knowing.[21]

Every act of knowledge, even those we call scientific (but which are not, in fact, of an essentially different nature from other epistemic acts), relies on a personal investment of the knower in that which he hopes to know. The world requires our participation, our engagement, our trust. The great error of modernist critical philosophy was to think that the world affords us apodictic certainty. Polanyi especially associates this error with the project of systematic doubt inaugurated by René Descartes, but he could just as well have named Hobbes along with a host of others. According to Polanyi, the Cartesian approach falsifies the reality of doxastic practice in both everyday life and in the more rarefied conditions of the laboratory. All of us, without fail, begin not from indubitable certainties but from a vast sea of background familiarity with the world. We know not only more than we can tell but also more than we can prove.

Polanyi insists that there is nothing about this faith in the inarticulate and the dubitable that entails nonrealism. As he writes, "personal knowledge in science is not made but discovered, and as such it claims to establish contact with reality beyond the clues on which it relies" (*PK*, 66). Indeed, for Polanyi it is precisely his *commitment* to realism that demands the recognition that we know more than we can prove or articulate. In our personal integration of the world's clues, we take ourselves to be discovering the hitherto hidden intelligibility of the world itself, an intelligibility that far exhausts our comprehension. Polanyi explains,

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

> Such is the true sense of objectivity in science. [It is] the discovery of rationality in nature, a name which was meant to say that the kind of order which the discoverer claims to see in nature goes far beyond his understanding; so that his triumph lies precisely in his foreknowledge of a host of yet hidden implications which his discovery will reveal in later days to other eyes. (*PK*, 67)

In order to engage the world of nature—and even, as participatory thinkers might want to add, whatever cultural and transcultural worlds transcend, encompass, or dwell within the natural—we have to begin by risking ourselves in a course of action that takes shape as a commitment to the way things might be. We should not be misled by the modal nature of this statement. Commitment is something much more than the mere entertaining of a possibility. A commitment requires existential risk and personal involvement—it requires, in other words, belief in the truth of that to which we are committed (*PK*, 322). We live in these commitments, Polanyi says, "as in the garment of our own skin. Like love, to which it is akin, this commitment is a 'shirt of flame', blazing with passion and, also like love, consumed by devotion to a universal demand" (67).

In seeking to know at all, we participate in activities that integrate subsidiary particulars as if we already knew what those particulars meant (or, more precisely, what they might come to mean). But since belief is not voluntaristically governed, since we cannot take an instrumental attitude towards our own beliefs or cognitive stances, how can we participate as if we knew when we know that we do not (yet) know? This problem is at the very heart of Personal Knowledge: "The principal purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false" (228). To facilitate this effort, Polanyi introduces the crucial notions of tradition and apprenticeship. Because the most basic aspects of our knowledge are tacit, somatic, and personal, we only learn these by submitting to the shaping powers of a tradition (or by apprenticing to a master).

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses that shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework (see *PK*, 280–281).

Science itself, Polanyi argues, is fiduciary in its commitment to the collegiality of the scientific community and in its trust in the existence of a common world that might be collaboratively explored. There is a dual commitment in Polanyi that we might read as quite classical: it is a commitment both to *philosophia*, understood as the love of the wisdom or truth that dwells in the world, and to *paideia*, understood as the authoritative formation that initiates one into community. This dual account of the processes and commitments entailed in knowing sets Polanyi again decisively outside the nature-culture divide that constitutes modernity.

Conclusion

The implications of Polanyi's thought for a participatory understanding of religious experience and knowledge seem apparent, but I want to conclude by drawing attention to two areas in which there might be some divergences.

First, a gentle prod. I suspect there exists a degree of difference between an account of Polanyi's explication of personal knowledge and the participatory account of enactive knowledge. As I read him, Polanyi

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

seems to think of the personal involvement of the knower as an essential component in the revelation of the world's many but nevertheless real faces. Only by indwelling the world—touching it with the elasticity of our bodies and deploying our passions and imagination—does the world appear and continue to appear in new, almost prophetic disclosures of its reality. But this raises a question: if we participate to this extraordinary degree in the perception of reality, then aren't we justified in supposing that reality may be far more *malleable* than we previously thought? This is not to suggest that reality is anarchically malleable but rather that it is susceptible to a variety of enactions—one might even say an infinite variety of enactions, so long as we remember Cantor's insistence that an infinite set may still be well ordered. Indeed, if our knowledge of the world is really like that of a probe, if we really do touch the world with the entirety of who we are—somatic, psycho-semantic, imaginal, spiritual—then surely part of what we know is the world as it becomes in response to our touch. Latour speaks of this with the language of hybrids or assemblages of nature and culture. We might think of it instead as co-creation or, as Tolkien put it, sub-creation (1984). It is an admittedly bold hypothesis—our own "shirt of flame"—but we could venture the thesis that what we know is the world as it emerges through the integral, multidimensional co-creative activity of the knower in his or her engagement both with the world and with the mystery that hyperbolically exceeds knower and world even while alone giving them to be.

This leads, however, to a second area of tension between the Polanyian and the participatory thinker. Although Polanyi relativizes the distinction between the two cultures of modernity by showing how the knowledge of the sciences and the knowledges of art, religion, and mathematics are alike rooted in tacit structures of knowing, he still insists on a divide between these two cultures. The world of science submits to verification, while art, mathematics, and religion are capable only of validation. But does this reduce religious worlds to a kind of sub-ontological status? For example, in his late writings with Harry Prosch, Polanyi rightly insists that religious beliefs be understood only insofar as they are coupled to religious practice, liturgy, and ritual. Thus, Polanyi writes,

> [I]t is only, therefore, through participation in acts of worship—through dwelling in these—that we see God. God is thus not a being whose existence can be established in some logical, scientific, or rational way before we engage in our worship of him. God is a commitment involved in our rites and myths. Through our integrative, imaginative efforts we see him as the focal point that fuses into meaning all the incompatibles involved in the practice of religion. But, as in art—only in a more whole and complete way—God also becomes the integration of all the incompatibles in our lives. (M 1975, 156)

The almost Geertzian vision of religion as culture has much to commend it, but like Geertz it seems that the late Polanyi may marginalize questions of religious truth, which is arguably also to dismiss questions about the being of religious entities (Geertz 1973). I have neither the space here nor the skill to mediate the conflicting accounts of Polanyi's relationship to religion offered by Prosch on the one hand and Martin Moleski on the other. I simply register a worry that Polanyi's treatment of religion may reinscribe precisely the sort of duality that the participatory vision of enaction is trying to escape.

That said, I think Polanyians might return the favor and suggest that insofar as we insist on sub-creatively enacted religious worlds as ontologically rich, we owe some account of how this can fulfill the basic requirements of realism required by such a thick ontological confession. In this regard, one might argue that the participatory approach has emphasized the role of co-creation or sub-creation too much and

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

has not attended to the parameters that reality and the real beings with which we are in relation set upon this action. It is one thing to speak of Teresa's seven mansions of the soul as participatorily enacted, but what about angels, daikinis, gods, and goddesses? What does it mean to say that they are ontologically thick but only ever co-created? My colleague and co-editor, Jorge Ferrer, is quite willing even to talk about the co-created nature and plurality of spiritual ultimates (such as the biblical Yahweh, the Buddhist *sunyata*, or the Brahman of the Indus valley). Polanyi, however, maintains that the mark of the real lies in the power it harbors to surprise us and to confront us with unpredictable manifestations. He writes,

> An empirical statement is true to the extent to which it reveals an aspect of reality, a reality largely hidden to us, and existing therefore independently of our knowing it. By trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be *existing independently of our knowing it*, all assertions of fact necessarily carry *universal intent. Our claim to speak of reality serves thus as the external anchoring of our commitment in making a factual statement.* (*PK*, 311)

If all propositions about the absolute must be indexed to the co-creative (or, as I now prefer, sub-creative) activity of human knowers, then it seems we have either abandoned the universal intent that Polanyi requires of realism or, perhaps, have replaced traditional absolutes with a new, implicit human absolute. But surely to confess a human absolute is either the essence of nonrealism, which is precisely what we in the participatory turn have wanted to avoid, or it involves the confession of something like the *Logos*, the *Purusha*, or the *Adam Kadmon*, an eternal, cosmic, human being quite different from the empirical, historical, individual human beings that engage in rituals, produce scholarship, and have the spiritual experiences we have been trying to understand as co-creative (cf. Barfield 1988). If something like this latter thought is necessary for the participatory turn to succeed, then participatory scholars may have to learn to speak more theologically than we have hitherto done, and here again Polanyi's insights about the fiduciary constitution of knowledge may be indispensable.

I mention this not because I think I already have a solution but rather because I am grateful for the way that the encounter with Polanyi's thought helps to raise and clarify the contours of this problem. The shared scholarly sensibility that we have been calling the participatory turn is relatively new, and there is no common set of dogmatic commitments that unite all the various fellow travelers on this road, save perhaps the effort to escape the forced choice between a determined set of modern coordinates—either mechanistically objective or socially subjective—when it comes to our understanding of contemplation, mysticism, spirituality, and the broad world of religious studies. Having taken this turn, it is not clear where our roads will lead or what twists lie ahead of us, but I am happy to acknowledge Polanyi as a travelling companion, even as one who like Machado's *caminantes* may have first made the way only by walking it.

Endnotes

[1]For those interested in the relation of modernity to questions of religion, notable texts include Hans Blumenberg (1983), *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Mark Lilla (2007), *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*; Susan Neiman (2002), *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*; Louis Dupré (1993), *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*; Michael Allen Gillespie (2008), *The Theological Origins of Modernity*; Karl Löwith (1949), *Meaning in History*; John Milbank (2006), *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*; Amos Funkenstein (1986), *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*; Eric Alliez (1996), *Capital Times: Tales from the Conquest of Time*; and Charles Taylor (2007), *A Secular Age*.

© 2024 by the Polanyi Society

[2]Compare the remark of Carl Jung in his lecture "Christ, a Symbol of the Self": "The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate. That is to say, when the individual remains undivided and does not become conscious of his inner opposite, the world must perforce act out the conflict and be torn into opposing halves" (1978, para. 126).

[3] Habermas has since tempered his confidence in the secularization thesis and now sees a place for the public expression of religious belief, even if he continues to insist that governmental decisions must be made from within the confines of a still-neutral secular discourse. On which, see Jürgen Habermas and Eduardo Mendieta (2002), *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*; Jürgen Habermas (2008), *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*; Jürgen Habermas and Ciaran Cronin (2010), *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*.

[4]Cf. Justin L. Barrett (2004), *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*; Pascal Boyer (2001), *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*; Daniel Clement Dennett (2006), *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*; Robert Wright (2009), *The Evolution of God*; Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and R. R. Warne (2004), *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*; Todd Tremlin (2006), *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*; Stewart Guthrie (1993), *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*.

[5]Barrett, it is worth noting, is something of an anomaly among the new cognitive scientists of religion, for while he offers purely evolutionary explanations for our doxastic activities, he argues that such explanations in no way render these activities suspect. Indeed, for Barrett, himself an observant Christian, the evolutionary explanation of religious-belief acquisition becomes an argument for the soundness of such belief.

[6]On secularity as its own tradition, see Taylor (2007), *A Secular Age*; Jeffrey Stout (2004), *Democracy and Tradition*.

[7]On the proliferation of new spiritual options in modernity, see Charles Taylor's treatment of the NOVA Effect in his magisterial volume *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007). Cf. Peter Berger's retraction of the secularization he championed earlier in his career. By contrast, the late Berger came to recognize that, when it comes to religion, "[m]odernity does not necessarily secularize; however, probably necessarily, it does pluralize" (2010, 3).

[8]For more on this, see my essays "Deprovincializing Philosophy of Religion" (Sherman 2018) and "Philosophy of Religion in a Fragmented Age" (Sherman 2023).

[9]Sean Kelly, "Participation, Complexity, and the Study of Religion," in *The Participatory Turn*, ed. Sherman and Ferrer (2008); Lee Irwin, "Esoteric Paradigms and Participatory Spirituality in the Teachings of Mikhaël Aïvanhov," in *The Participatory Turn*, ed. Sherman and Ferrer (2008); Jorge Ferrer (2002), *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*.

[10]Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991), T*he Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. For a similarly nonrepresentational approach to perception, see James J. Gibson (1979), *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.

[11]"It is not the brain, it is the animal (or person) who sees. It's the person, not the brain that has semantic powers" (Noë 2004, 29).

[12]*Summa Theologiae* II-II q.180 a.3.

[13]Thomas Merton (2003), 59. Merton understands contemplation as the flowering of active participation in the liturgy, the celebration of which involves sights and sounds, movements and bodies, singing, remembering, speaking, all while necessarily immersed in the community of other bodies and souls. He writes, "Here, least of all, is contemplation something merely mental and discursive. It involves man's whole being, body and soul, mind, will, imagination, emotion and spirit" (63).

[14]Alva Noë writes, "All perception has the character of a probe—it receives only by also inserting itself into the world it perceives…. Think of the eye/brain as a sort of visual hand" (2004, 130).

[15]See, for example, *M* (1975), 22.

[16]For the Polanyi-inspired efforts of one leading social scientist to get beyond this reductionistic view of persons, see especially Christian Smith (2010), *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*.

[17]On the double bind of modernity, see Richard Tarnas (1991), *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 416–22.

[18]See "The Structure of Consciousness" in Michael Polanyi and Marjorie Glicksman Grene (1969), *Knowing and Being*.

© 2024 by the Polanyi Society

[19]Cf. Polanyi and Grene (1969), 131–32: "The knowledge of a problem is, therefore, like the knowing of unspecifiables, a knowing more than you can tell. But our awareness of unspecifiable things, whether of particulars or of the coherence of particulars, is intensified here to an exciting intimation of their hidden presence. It is an engrossing possession of incipient knowledge which passionately strives to validate itself."

[20]Cf. *M* (1975), 36.

[21]Admittedly, the centrality of from-to structure is an aspect of Polanyi's thought that emerges only in *The Tacit Dimension*, nearly a decade after the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, but the sense that our fiduciary commitments put us in contact with the real world is already fully present in the earlier work.

REFERENCES

Alliez, Eric. 1996. *Capital Times: Tales from the Conquest of Time*. Translated by G. V. D. Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Antes, Peter, Armin W. Geertz, and R. R. Warne. 2004. *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Religion and Reason. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Atran, Scott. 2002. *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*. Evolution and Cognition. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Barfield, Owen. 1977. *The Rediscovery of Meaning, and Other Essays*. 1st edition. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

———. 1988. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Barrett, Justin L. 2004. *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* Cognitive Science of Religion Series. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Berger, Peter L. 2010. *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.

Blumenberg, Hans. 1983. *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Boyer, Pascal. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

D'Costa, Gavin. 2005. *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Dennett, Daniel Clement. 2006. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking.

Dupré, Louis. 1993. *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ferrer, Jorge. 2002. *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Flood, Gavin. 1999. *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*. Cassell Religious Studies. New York: Continuum.

Foucault, Michel. 2002. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Routledge Classics.

Funkenstein, Amos. 1986. *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Culltures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Gibson, James J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gillespie, Michael Allen. 2008. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Guthrie, Stewart. 1993. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2008. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

———. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press.

———, and Ciaran Cronin. 2010. *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: PolityPress.

———, and Eduardo Mendieta. 2002. *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Harman, Graham. 2009. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics. Anamnesis*. Melbourne, Australia: re.press.

Irwin, Lee. 2008. "Esoteric Paradigms and Participatory Spirituality in the Teachings of Mikhaël Aïvanhov." In *The Participatory Turn*, ed. Sherman and Ferrer, 197–224.

Jung, C. G. 1978. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Volume 9, part 2 of Collected Works. Bollingen Series. Princeton, NJ: Bollingen/Princeton University Press.

Kelly, Sean. 2008. "Participation, Complexity, and the Study of Religion." In *The Participatory Turn*, ed. Sherman and Ferrer, 113–34.

King, Richard. 1999. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East.'* London; New York: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lilla, Mark. 2007. *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*. 1st edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Lindbeck, George A. 2009. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 25th anniversary edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Löwith, Karl. 1949. *Meaning in History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Merton, Thomas. 2003. *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Milbank, John. 2006. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2nd edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.

Neiman, Susan. 2002. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. 1967. *The Will to Power*. Translated by Walter Arnold Kaufmann. New York: Random House.

Noë, Alva. 2004. *Action in Perception*. Representation and Mind. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Noë, Alva. 2005. "Real Presence" *Philosophical Topics* 33 (1):235-264.

Polanyi, Michael. 1964. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Revised edition. Harper Torchbooks. New York: Harper & Row.

———. 1966. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

———, and Marjorie Glicksman Grene. 1969. *Knowing and Being: Essays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———, and Harry Prosch. 1975. *Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sherman, Jacob Holsinger. 2018. "Deprovincializing Philosophy of Religion: From 'Faith and Reason' to the Postcolonial Revaluation of Religious Epistemologies." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86(2): 341–363.

———. 2023. "Philosophy of Religion in a Fragmented Age: Practice and Participatory Realism." *Religions* 14(3).

———, and Jorge N. Ferrer, editors. 2008. *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Smith, Christian. 2010. *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*. Chicago, IL: London: University of Chicago Press.

Snow, C. P. 1993. *The Two Cultures*. Canto edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stout, Jeffrey. 2004. *Democracy and Tradition*. New Forum Books. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tarnas, Richard. 1991. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped Our World View*. New York: Harmony Books.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Tremlin, Todd. 2006. *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tolkien, J. R. R. 1984. "On Fairy Stories." In Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, 109–161. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. 1991. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wright, Robert. 2009. *The Evolution of God*. New York: Little, Brown.

 © 2024 by the Polanyi Society