

# QUESTIONING POLANYI'S *MEANING*: A RESPONSE TO RONALD HALL

by Bruce Haddox

*Abstract.* Michael Polanyi's distinction between the indicative meaning of scientific statements and the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of art and religion, presented in *Meaning*, is based on an abstraction from concrete experience and betrays an inadequate understanding of religious discourse, particularly the discourse of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In fact, Polanyi's vision in *Personal Knowledge*, which analyses the priority of personal action to all achievements of explication, seems either to be denied or forgotten by the positions taken in *Meaning*. Hence, the argument here is that *Meaning* is a deviation from *Personal Knowledge* and a step away from the resources necessary to grasp adequately the logic of religious discourse.

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At the beginning of my remarks I want to express my essential agreement with the positions taken by Ronald Hall's essay. I agree with him that Michael Polanyi's analysis of religion in *Meaning* is inadequate, and I also agree that some of Polanyi's arguments there seem to "head in the direction of the old positivistic assumptions concerning the relation of the sciences and the arts."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I believe that Hall's introduction of Søren Kierkegaard's concepts of the "aesthetic" and the "existential" is helpful in trying to get a handle on what exactly is disquieting about Polanyi's analysis. Specifically, I wish to think about these concepts in my response, for while the aesthetic-existential distinction can be a useful tool for analysis, it also raises several important issues, especially in relation to Polanyi's work in *Meaning*. I want to mention three of these issues here and then raise some questions that seem to need further inquiry.

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## SCIENCE AND ART

First, I think Hall's suggestion that science and art are both "aesthetic" insofar as they are both abstractions from our concrete, lived experience is worthy of careful consideration. In fact Hall has good reasons for making his claim. The language of science, with its third person, present, indicative form does not adequately reflect our concrete experience. The absence of any past or future tenses betrays the reification that scientific language accomplishes. The presence only of the indicative mood signals the loss of the many modes of personal presence which characterize our everyday life.

However, once Hall's claim is made, several questions immediately come to mind. If science is like art by virtue of being "framed" and therefore abstract, is science like art in terms of its meaning? I raise this question because Hall says that he does not disagree with Polanyi's description of art but only with Polanyi's failure to see science as sharing with art its aesthetic character. But what does the pairing of science with art in terms of "framing" do to Polanyi's "indicative-symbolic-metaphorical" distinction? Is science no longer indicative or, because of its abstract nature, is it indicative in a different sense than found in ordinary language? Does Polanyi's analysis of art as distinguished from science, in terms of meaning at least, need to be re-worked?

The answers to these questions require careful analysis and suggest directions of thought which are beyond the purview of this essay. However, it is possible to mention some preliminary steps toward dealing with the issue. Surely Polanyi is correct in saying that science is indicative or that the language of science is used to indicate discoveries which in Polanyi's idiom bear upon reality. But what he seems to ignore as Hall notes is the "framed" nature of science, the exclusive third person present indicative character of its language, which gives scientific claims a similar status to artistic ones. Thus scientific language, understood in terms of its own logical structure is indicative, but in a parasitic way. The act of integration performed whereby someone in particular indicates *X* and in which it is revealed that *X* is indicated by someone in particular is the act of indication rooted in our concrete experience and shaped by ordinary language. The presence of persons as indicators in our first person language shows explicitly what Polanyi has always maintained is the fiduciary grounding of all claims. What this means is that all "framed" indications cannot be analyzed adequately *in themselves*, as Polanyi seems to be doing in *Meaning*, but must be cast within the logic of personal action. "Framed" science is a personal achievement of an abstract nature which is used by someone to indicate something about an aspect of reality.

If this is true, then Polanyi's distinction between art and science in *Meaning* can be looked at from a different perspective. Polanyi's analysis of the inner dynamics of symbol and metaphor are interesting and illuminating, but he does not notice that metaphor and symbol are not only that which is primarily attended *to* (as it is in his analysis) but are also that which can be attended *from* in order to inquire into the nature of some reality. A symbol or metaphor can be enjoyed in itself. A piece of art or poetry can be looked at as an aesthetic object, but they also can be subsidiary elements in another integration intended to indicate something about the world. Here, too, a "framed" achievement is used by someone to indicate something. In this, at least, the radical distinction between scientific and artistic meaning is negated.

The point here is that indication is an act by someone, not a logical characteristic of a particular class of propositions, for example, scientific statements. Metaphors and symbols can be and are used to indicate aspects of the world. They are not simply art objects. Like science, art is created by the imagination through abstraction and is what it is by virtue of how it is used in personal action. Polanyi argues this in *Personal Knowledge*. He seems to forget it in *Meaning*.

#### POLANYI AND WESTERN RELIGION

The second issue I wish to mention is Hall's claim that western religion, far from being essentially aesthetic, as Polanyi suggests, is existential and concrete and hence different in this respect from art and science. Again I agree with Hall in his description of religion. I do not believe that Polanyi's analysis, as interesting as it is, is adequate. To locate religious activity in "Great Time" not only reminds one of that old familiar theological term *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history) but, as Hall suggests, "Great Time" does not seem to be an adequate location for Christian experience. Am I a "prodigal son" in Great Time but not in my everyday actions? Is the colleague with whom I have to deal every day, a fool in concrete experience and a "person for whom Christ died" in Great Time only? It is true, as Hall implies, that the rituals of western religion must be understood not primarily as an escape from temporality but as occurrences within time by which transformations are accomplished, maintained, and nourished. To take ritual by itself, abstracted from historical experience, as the object of analysis is to misunderstand in a fundamental way the essential power of the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition.

However, these claims raise further questions. What for instance does this mean for Polanyi's primary distinctions we mentioned earlier? Hall states: "The language of . . . religious encounter is not symbolic or metaphorical in Polanyi's sense; rather, it is indicative."<sup>2</sup> But,

we must add (as does Hall), not “indicative” in Polanyi’s sense either, since that is where the subsidiaries have no functional intrinsic interest. Clearly this is not true in religious discourse that is used for indication. Exactly how indication operates in religion and what relation it has to indication in science needs to be clarified. Surely it would be somewhat strange to say that the language of religious encounter is not symbolic or metaphorical, and I recognize that Hall does not say this. He quickly adds “in Polanyi’s sense.” What needs clarification, however, is an answer to the question: In *what* sense, then, is it symbolic or metaphorical? And what relationship exists between its metaphorical character and its indicative function?

#### INDICATION IN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

The issue of how indication operates in religion and what relation it has to indication in science needs explanation. I am not certain what direction Hall would take in dealing with this. Perhaps one way to approach this issue is to notice that the indicative symbolic distinction simply will not hold as a definitive characteristic of the difference between science and religion. As suggested earlier, symbols and metaphors can become subsidiary elements in what Polanyi calls “self-centered” integrations and these can be powerful clues bearing on reality. Surely this is at work in religious indication. The cross of Christ, for example, is neither simply a symbol in itself for the Christian nor is it a symbol that the Christian merely thinks about. Indeed, the cross symbolizes the story which called it into being as a symbol. As Stephen Crites writes: “a symbol (for example, the cross) is invested with its symbolic meaning by its position in a story, and when it is employed in other stories it imports the hint of its own story into the others. An idea or a symbol appearing in a story is not static or dissociated, even if it is the ‘point’ of the story; it receives as much meaning from the story as it gives to the story, and in fact can give little that it has not received from some story.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is impossible to inquire into the meaning of the cross without immediately being caught up in the story of Jesus, the story of the church, the story of Israel. Certainly, the Judaeo-Christian tradition does not present symbols and metaphors to be considered as keys to reality in themselves. All such symbols and metaphors are “story-bound,” or as Hall suggests, they are both historical and existential. Polanyi’s analysis of religion ignores the storied nature of symbols and this, I believe, accounts for what amounts to an objective and an ahistorical account of religious symbols. Hence, he overlooks the fact that a symbol, such as the cross, is the means by which the Christian inquires into the meaning of his life, the reality of others, and the meaning of history. Certainly, the verification of such inquiries is not as simple as the verifica-

tion of empirical claims, but that does not mean that realities are not being indicated and that truth claims are not being made.

Another possible direction one can take is offered in the clue Hall provides in his notion of "first person indication," which he opposes to the "kind of third person indication we found in science which serves to hide the speaker."<sup>4</sup> This suggestion is an important one and deserves further attention. For example, does first person indication differ logically from third person indication? If so, in what respects? Does the recognition of first person indication shed any light on our understanding of the ontological status of third person indication? If so, what kind of light?

Clearly, the use of the first person pronoun to indicate something is different from the use of the third person pronoun, primarily because of the peculiar "logic" involved. Certainly the "indication" accomplished when I indicate myself by using "I" is different from the indication accomplished when I indicate John Smith by using "he." This is because only I can indicate myself by "I." It also is because when I do indicate myself in such a manner, I do not indicate something at a distance from me, which all others can in principle indicate in the same way, but rather I indicate *by appearing as* the indicator of what is indicated. This is the logic of appearance which is the basis for all personal action. How does such indication square with Polanyi's three-fold distinction between indication, symbol, and metaphor? The answer is: It does not.

Polanyi's distinction assumes that the logic of indication is a third person indication, and he also assumes that, if third person indication is not occurring, then something other than indication must be taking place. But, if first person indication is logically different from third person indication and, furthermore, if it is logically prior to it, then it may be that any adequate account of indication as a personal act will notice the necessary reflexivity involved. This, at least, would grant the possibility for an examination of religion as an attempt to indicate the grounds of human action, the products of which also include scientific indications and artistic achievement.

It is obvious that I agree with Hall that Polanyi does not appreciate the historical nature of much of the religious discourse in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Such discourse is like the logic of first person indication and it is precisely this logic which is the logic of everyday prose. Only by abstraction from our concrete experience can a completely third person logic be achieved. But I have always assumed that one major implication of Polanyi's work is that all third person structures are grounded in and maintained by first person reality. To take third person indication as the starting point in a discussion of meaning and as a standard against which to measure the

structures of symbol and metaphor is a move I could not have predicted from reading *Personal Knowledge* and one that puzzled me upon reading *Meaning*.

It seems to me that, in the light of both Hall's suggestions and the questions raised by them, a careful rethinking of Polanyi's major distinctions in *Meaning* is in order. Polanyi can sharply distinguish "self-centered" acts from "self-giving" ones only by ignoring in his analysis the self-involving nature of all actions. He can so clearly distinguish symbol and metaphor from indicative language only by imagining both as having objective status. More importantly, he considers symbol and metaphor to be that *about* which we think. But symbol and metaphor, insofar as they are embodied in our discourse and are forms of thought that enable us both to understand and respond to our concrete experience, are primarily that with which we think about the nature of our world, ourselves, and God. Furthermore, this way of thinking with symbol is crucial to understanding the Christian religion with its storied, historical form. For in this tradition, symbol recollects those stories which are the grounds for our thinking and which form the means by which the Christian indicates his relationship to the world. If this is the case, then the insights of Polanyi's prior work, which center on the personal participation of all feats of knowing, are more helpful to our understanding of religion than the positions taken in *Meaning*.

#### NOTES

1. Ronald Hall, "Michael Polanyi on Art and Religion: Some Critical Reflections on *Meaning*," in this issue, p. 15.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Stephen Crites, "Myth, Story, History," in *Parable, Myth and Language*, ed. Tony Stoneburner (Washington: Church Society for College Work, 1968), p. 69.
4. Hall.