

# MICHAEL POLANYI ON ART AND RELIGION: SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON *MEANING*

by *Ronald L. Hall*

*Abstract.* This paper is a critique of the theory of meaning in art and religion that Michael Polanyi developed in his last work entitled *Meaning*. After giving a brief summary of Polanyi's theory of art, I raise two serious difficulties, not with the theory itself, but with the claims Polanyi makes about the relation of meaning in art to science and religion. Regarding the first difficulty, I argue that Polanyi betrays an earlier insight when in *Meaning* he attempts to dissociate meaning in art from meaning in science; instead I argue that *both* science and art are aesthetic enterprises. Regarding the second, I argue that Polanyi's account of religion is an aesthetic reduction, that meaning in religion, at least in the Western tradition, is not so much an aesthetic as it is an existential matter.

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In his last work, *Meaning*, Michael Polanyi, with the help of Harry Prosch, articulates a theory of meaning in art and religion based on the epistemology he had developed in his earlier writings.<sup>1</sup> These focused largely on science and the problem of recovering meaning from the threat of destruction by a mistaken ideal of objectivity. His attack on objectivism led Polanyi to the view that meaning in science is rooted in the tacit, informal powers of the scientist's personal judgment. This led to the more general view that *all* meaning is achieved by the imaginative, creative and basically unspecifiable feats of integration performed by persons-in-community who give voice to that meaning with universal intent. By accrediting the power of the human imagination to make cognitive contact with reality, Polanyi's epistemology seemed naturally to open out towards a new theory of meaning in art and religion where imagination, creativity, and other personal components are admittedly essential, though usually subjec-

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tivized and emptied of cognitive content. *Meaning*, in short, is the first explicit and fully developed attempt to apply the principles of personal knowing to art and religion.

Even though *Meaning* makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of art and religion, the critical, even the "post-critical," reader may discover some very serious shortcomings in the work. In the following remarks I want to focus on two different but related shortcomings. The first has to do with the relation of science to art and the second with the relation of art to religion. To set the stage for this discussion, I will present briefly the general outline of Polanyi's contention that artificial meaning, what he calls "semantic" meaning, has three forms: indication, symbolization and metaphor.

#### INDICATIVE, SYMBOLIC, AND METAPHORICAL MEANING

For Polanyi, the simplest, most basic kind of meaning contrived by man is *indication*. In this kind of meaning words, signs, and other pointers are used to refer to things in the world. Sign and signified object, however, are asymmetrical in indicative meaning for "the word in use has in fact no interest in itself, as an object."<sup>2</sup> The fundamentally different way that we are aware of words and their meaning in indication produces what Polanyi calls "the transparency of language." With eyes and ears we focus on the meaning of words and not on the words themselves, often being able to recall the joint meaning of the text we have read or heard but unable to remember the specific words, or even, perhaps, what language the text was in. Polanyi puts the point as follows: "Words, understood in this way, function as indicators, pointing in a subsidiary way *to* that focal integration upon which they bear. . . . We can lump all these subsidiaries together as indicators pointing at something that is of intrinsic interest and recognize that, by contrast, *they* lack this intrinsic interest."<sup>3</sup>

Indicative meaning, according to this scheme, is "self-centered." This is so because in the structure of tacit knowing it is the person who integrates the subsidiaries into their bearing on the focal object. Such integrations are not self-centered in the sense that awareness is circled back in on the self; in fact, the precise opposite occurs. As Polanyi puts it, indications are self-centered integrations "because they are made *from* the self as a center (which includes all the subsidiary clues in which we dwell) *to* the object of our focal attention."<sup>4</sup>

The language of indicative meaning is the language of prose. It is the ordinary language of day-to-day communication and factual assertion. Indication is the language, Polanyi says, of science, but not of art and religion.

There are, however, other forms of meaning and Polanyi seems to suggest that they are in some sense richer. The first of these is sym-

bolization. There are two basic differences between indication and symbolization. In the first place, the intrinsic interest in the subsidiary and the focal elements of the comprehension is reversed: the subsidiary elements in symbolic meaning are of intrinsic interest while the focal elements are not. Polanyi uses the example of a flag to illustrate what he means. A flag is not a sign that points *to* something; *it* is the focus of our attention, at least on such occasions as the singing of the national anthem or the liturgy of the salute. As Polanyi puts it: "Suppose we look at a flag, or a medal, or the tombstone of a great man. As objects, these things have substantially no interest to us; but what functions subsidiarily in bearing on, say, a flag, *is* of great intrinsic interest to us, for it includes our total awareness of our membership in a nation. When we look at our country's flag on a solemn occasion, this otherwise meaningless piece of cloth becomes for us a moving spectacle and to some people even a sacred object."<sup>5</sup>

The second difference between indicative and symbolic meaning has to do with self-centeredness. While indication is self-centered, Polanyi contends that symbolization is self-giving. What this means is that the self is surrendered to the focal object, and carried away, so to speak, by the object. Here the subsidiaries are embodied in the focal object; it stands for or symbolizes them. The focal object thus reflects back on the subsidiaries, including the self, and the self is carried off into the symbol.

We are now ready to consider the third form of artificial, or semantic, meaning that Polanyi develops, namely, metaphor. It is this kind of meaning, Polanyi will argue, that is dominant in art and religion.

Metaphorical meaning, like all meaning, is established through the integration of subsidiary particulars into a comprehensive whole. The distinctive feature of metaphor is that it integrates seemingly incompatible elements into a coherent pattern; for example, "man is a thinking reed" combines seemingly incompatible elements together in an imaginative and novel insight. The main difference between metaphor and indication is that metaphor is self-giving and not self-centered and the subsidiary elements are of intrinsic interest. The main difference between metaphor and symbolization is that in metaphorical meaning the focal element is intrinsically interesting. In other words, metaphor is self-giving and not self-centered, and its subsidiary *and* its focal elements are of intrinsic interest. Metaphor is thus more like symbolization than indication, but it goes beyond symbolization by granting intrinsic significance to the symbol itself. Polanyi writes: "We may thus see that when a symbol embodying a significant matter has a significance of its own and this is akin to the matter it embodies, the result is metaphor."<sup>6</sup>

Meaning in art is similar to metaphorical meaning in that art is able to carry us away and in that it involves the integration of incompati-

bles. A metaphor per se, however, does not constitute a work of art, although metaphorical components may add up to an art work. What is needed for this to happen is a frame or a "framing effect." The frame is the artificial pattern of the metaphorical meaning which serves to isolate it from ordinary, everyday experience. We are well aware of this frame when, at the theatre, we witness a "murder" on stage. The artificial frame separates what "happens" there from actual historical actions, for what is going on is after all a "play" and the "actions" there issue not from the intention of the persons playing the parts but from the text of the play. Art work, then, may arise out of everyday events. Stories involving these events have a factual content and can be expressed in prose, but the framing effect transforms the story into a work of art. Such an integration of incompatibles, namely, the story and the artificial frame, serves to carry us away as we surrender ourselves to the work of art.

#### ART AND LIFE

With this very brief summary of Polanyi's theory of meaning, we are now ready to see how the explicit discussion of its application to art and religion raises some very urgent questions, and perhaps some very serious problems with Polanyi's view.

According to Polanyi, the distinctive feature of art that carries it beyond metaphorical meaning is the frame. As I have said, the frame serves to isolate the work of art from the historical actuality of daily life or what we might call the existential field of human action *in concreto*. We might even say that *all* art is abstract by virtue of its frame—abstract, that is, in relation to the concrete realm of historical time and action. This does not destroy the traditional distinction between abstract and representative art; rather it simply relativizes the distinction. This means that representative art is more closely related to historical time and human action than abstract art; yet, because of the frame, even representative art is abstract relative to the actual life it seeks to re-present.

In the context of a discussion of Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, Stephen Crites makes a distinction that illuminates Polanyi's point about the abstracting effect of the frame in art works. He distinguishes between the *aesthetic* and the *existential*. He describes the aesthetic in the following way: "The ideality bodied forth in a work of art is always an abstraction from experience. It arises out of the temporality of experience, but it achieves a purified form as a self-contained possibility, free of temporality. That is why both artist and audience are able to come to rest in it."<sup>7</sup> Crites contends that the term "aesthetic" is also used by Kierkegaard in an extended sense to signify a certain way of life or modality of existence: "The aesthetic

way of life is a strategy for giving life coherence of a sort. It is a strategy modeled on the work of art, extending that model so far as possible to one's experience as a whole. Here Kierkegaard has in mind the romantic ideal of making life into a work of art."<sup>8</sup>

The aesthetic is contrasted, Crites says, with the existential, or what I have called the historical field of human action *in concreto*. Both the aesthetic and the existential modes of life are integrations, to use a good Polanyian term, "but *unlike* the aesthetic, the existential integration occurs through a projection into temporality through action."<sup>9</sup> Further Crites maintains: "The aesthetic strategy, however, proceeds by negating that temporality, the existential movement by intensifying it through passion giving it a form that is itself temporalized."<sup>10</sup>

This distinction between the aesthetic and the existential helps us to understand what Polanyi is calling the "framing effect" in art. The existential, in other words, is transformed into the aesthetic by virtue of a frame which isolates a certain feature of the existential and bodies it forth in abstract ideality.

This abstract quality of the aesthetic, due to its frame, produces another related feature, namely, what I will call the anonymity of the work of art.<sup>11</sup> The work of art is not only cut off from the concrete field of human action; it is cut off from the "actor" or the author who produced the work. The work of art, once produced, has an independent existence, a life of its own, that can be appreciated without knowing anything about the author or even who the author is. Polanyi puts it this way: "From the vantage of this analysis, we can see that poems and also paintings, sculptures, and plays are so many closed packages of clues, portable and lasting."<sup>12</sup> And speaking specifically of poems but implying a general characteristic of the work of art, Polanyi says: "strictly speaking, it is the *poem* that speaks to us, not the poet . . . the poem is not the voice of the poet and its meaning is not conveyed by its prose content."<sup>13</sup>

Other writers have noticed how the framing effect cuts the artist off from his work. For example, Louis Mackey, speaking specifically of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity, says: "As the poet is silent in his poem, so Kierkegaard is silent in his books: 'I always stand,' he wrote, 'in an altogether poetic relationship to my works, and I am, therefore, a pseudonym.'"<sup>14</sup> What Mackey says here about poetry, namely, that in it the poet disappears behind his work, is also true, Polanyi contends, for *all* works of art. Along these more general lines Polanyi's account of art work would agree with Hannah Arendt's, at least when she says: "Action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless, whereas an art work retains its relevance whether or not we know the master's name."<sup>15</sup>

This then, in very basic outline, is Polanyi's view of art. Again the main thrust of the theory is that art achieves an integration of ele-

ments drawn from the existential realm of life by framing them in an aesthetic abstraction.

#### THE RELATION OF ART TO SCIENCE

With this background set, we must now turn to our task of criticism. Let me begin by saying that I believe Polanyi's account of art is basically sound and illuminating. The problems I see lie elsewhere. The first problem has to do not with the theory of art per se but rather with the claims made in *Meaning* about the relationship of art to science; and along the same lines, my second problem has to do with the way that Polanyi relates his theory of art to religion.

In Polanyi's earlier works, he made an innovative claim that science and art were grounded in the same structure of inquiry, the key feature of which was the centrality of the imaginative, creative person. He argued that the scientist was not in actual practice a cool, aloof, mechanical robot. Rather, he argued that the scientist, like the artist, was passionately and personally involved in creative, imaginative, and novel integrations that sometimes led to new discoveries and great new theories. Polanyi, however, was not simply aligning science with art by reducing science to a subjective enterprise. On the contrary, he also presented us with the promise, made good in *Meaning*, to develop a theory of art that, like science, makes its claims with universal intent. In other words, Polanyi seemed to want to establish both science and art on similar grounds, grounds which were neither objectivistic nor subjectivistic, but *personal*.

Polanyi's intention here and the epistemological structure of tacit knowing in terms of which it can be realized deserves our heartiest applause. Yet in *Meaning* we sense that at times Polanyi seems to be working against his own original insight concerning the relation of art and science. Consider, for example, the following passages:

Perhaps the most important difference between the arts, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other, is found at the end of their pursuit, in the way the two are tested. Technical innovations and scientific discoveries are subjected to much more impersonal tests than works of art are. . . .<sup>16</sup>

The arts are works of the imagination, and so are the sciences.<sup>17</sup> [Yet artistic] images cannot be tested by experience in the way the actual contents of science can be.<sup>18</sup>

The pursuit of science, as such, involves the imagination only minimally in comparison with the pursuit of the arts.<sup>19</sup>

These passages indicate that Polanyi has not altogether given up his original insight that both the arts and the sciences are works of the human imagination. But there is a certain drift here that seems to

head in the direction of the old positivistic assumptions concerning the relation of the sciences and the arts, assumptions Polanyi so wanted to defeat. Such positivistic assumptions include the assumption that the hypotheses of the sciences are empirically verifiable while art works are not subject to experiential tests, the assumption that the sciences are impersonal and objective while the arts are personal and subjective, and the assumption that the sciences assert facts based on observations while the arts involve values based on acceptances.

It seems possible to give a charitable interpretation to these passages and to overlook what I have called the drift back into a positivistic dichotomy of the arts and the sciences. We could do this, and perhaps we should, if we take seriously the earlier works and if we take into account that Polanyi was perhaps exaggerating the distinction between the arts and the sciences for the point of clarifying the nature of artistic meaning. We could do this, and should, if it were not for one important distinction that Polanyi made, or at least implied, which clearly cannot be overlooked and which does seem to mitigate his original insight that brought the sciences and the arts closer together.

Polanyi's claim is that an art work is distinctive as a form of metaphorical meaning because of its frame, which isolates it from the world of historical everyday existence and from its author. While art is relatively abstract, we are led to believe by Polanyi that science operates in the realm of indicative meaning or in the realm of events and actions which can be embodied in prose. Science in other words seems to be a much more concrete enterprise than art, much more closely related to the existential world of historical action and everyday experience. The reason we are led to this conclusion is that Polanyi clearly says that scientific meaning is *indicative*, *not symbolic* and *not metaphorical*, the kinds of meaning more closely associated with the arts. The language of indicative meaning, however, is the language most aptly suited to the everyday experience of human beings involved in ordinary actions. Indicative meaning, or the language of prose, is the language of everyday existence *and* of science, while symbolic and metaphorical meaning are associated with the aesthetic.

My basic problem with this way of viewing the situation is that it hides a deep affinity between science and art. Science, I want to claim—indeed I thought Polanyi wanted to claim—is more associated with the aesthetic, the arts, than with the existential. Let me explain: for the most part scientists do not deal in ordinary experiences. This is not to say that what they deal with is not related to ordinary experiences; of course it is just as art works have some relation to the concrete existential world. However, the scientist focuses in on a certain aspect or part of the experience and basically considers it in abstrac-

tion, in pure generality. Atoms, gravity, energy—all of these are abstractions. Moreover, the relation of the scientist to his theories and discoveries is also abstract. The scientist, like the artist, is intensely and passionately involved in his enterprise; yet, as in the case of art a certain detachment remains. Like the artist, the scientist does not appear or reveal himself in and through his work. Just as the artist disappears behind his work, so does the scientist tend to disappear in his highly formalized and impersonal third person “dialogue” often carried on in the abstract “language” of mathematical quantification.

We must conclude from this that the framing effect does not, as Polanyi claims, serve to distinguish art from science; on the contrary it points out the affinity between the two. *Both art and science are aesthetic enterprises*, a point much more in line with Polanyi’s original work.

#### THE RELATION OF ART TO RELIGION

My second criticism of Polanyi’s theory of meaning has to do with the relation of art to religion. Just as Polanyi does not seem to see the extent to which science is aesthetic, so he does not see the extent to which religion is existential. Polanyi’s theory of religion tends to turn religion into an abstraction when it may be that it ought to have its center in the existential.

To begin to unpack this claim, let me cite a few passages that show how Polanyi has interpreted religion:

Rites and ceremonies break into our normal routines and introduce an action into our lives (a celebration) that is not an action in the ordinary sense of the word. Our ordinary actions are all located within the temporal frame and are directed at specifics—at specific materials oriented toward specific ends at specific times and places. In fact, *timing*, the choice of the proper time—for the whole action and for each of its parts—is of the very essence of genuine, acceptable action. But the action of a ritual has meaning only in terms of Great Time—the time before all time—which has and needs no date.<sup>20</sup>

Let us ask, then, what sort of possibility the sacred myths that inform religious rites must have in order to gain our acceptance. We see at once that their possibility cannot lie in our regarding their accounts of events as factually true in the sense of day-to-day possibilities. That is, their possibility cannot lie in our conceiving the events as they represent them as actually having occurred in secular time—at least not *as* such events as these would occur in secular time—because their very detachment rests upon their events being understood as having occurred rather in that “Great Time”—that out-of-this-world time—that Eliade speaks of.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting that Polanyi alludes to the work of Mircea Eliade. Indeed, Eliade in *Cosmos and History*,<sup>22</sup> has described well the religious phenomenon of being transported to the Great Time outside of ordinary “profane” historical time. Yet to be fair to Eliade this is only one possible expression of the religious experience. It is basically an



aesthetic expression within the ontological context of what he calls "cosmos." Eliade, however, speaks of another ontological framework which does not prize the escape from mundane time, what he calls the ontology of "history." The expression of religion here takes on a much different shape. The myths, rituals, and worship in this context serve to intensify the experience of the existential, the historical, the concrete. In historical religion the primary field of religious encounter is the existential, whereas the religion that grows out of the cosmological perspective has its primary thrust towards an escape from, a denial of, the existential, which it seeks to accomplish through aesthetic abstraction.

If we are thinking of religion in the historical sense, that is, of the western experience, especially the Judaeo-Christian tradition, then Polanyi's account of religion simply will not do. Religious encounter within history is not primarily an aesthetic experience. To put it differently, religious encounter within history has no artificial frame; it really does occur in the everyday experience of human action *in concreto*. Moreover, religious encounter within history does not lead to personal disappearance as in science and art; rather, history becomes the very space of human and divine appearance in concrete revelations through words and deeds.

The medium through which humans encounter themselves, others, and God is the medium of ordinary, everyday, pedestrian language, that is, through the word *in concreto*. The language of such primary religious encounter is not symbolic or metaphorical in Polanyi's sense; rather, it is indicative. It is not, however, that kind of third person indication we found in science, which serves to hide the speaker. The medium of religious encounter within history is the first person indicative use of the word wherein the human and the divine each *appears* as a concrete "I." "In acting and speaking," Hannah Arendt has said, "men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identification and thus make their appearance in the human world."<sup>23</sup> This use of the word in concrete speech and action is the realm of existential appearance, not the realm of aesthetic anonymity.

In historical religious encounters, personal relationships of dialogue and revelation replace the poetic anonymity of the aesthetic encounter. Polanyi has not adequately recognized this historical dimension of religious experience. He has, as a consequence, poeticized religion; he has seen the religious experience as aesthetic, as an abstraction. He has not done this for the purpose of leading us to the existential dimension, as did Kierkegaard in his pseudonymous writings; rather he has given us the idea that the transportation out of the existential is the true goal of religion. Religious experience gives us, Polanyi seems to believe, a much-needed sense of aesthetic rest and

repose high above the existential realm of day-to-day life. I would not deny that we sometimes need this aesthetic rest from the flow of history; nor would I deny that art is the best way to meet this need; I would not even deny that historical myths and rituals are in some sense aesthetic abstractions; what I would deny is that such abstractions are the sole, or even the primary, field of religious encounter.

Because Polanyi has reduced religion to the aesthetic level and thus has not seen the existential dimension of religious experience as being of primary importance, I must conclude that his account of religion is at best incomplete and at worst dangerously misleading.

## NOTES

1. Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). Some earlier works are *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964); *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1967); *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

2. Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 69.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

7. Stephen Crites, "Pseudonymous Authorship as Art and as Act," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 210.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

10. *Ibid.*

11. The distinction developed by Hannah Arendt between work and action is very illuminating here. In the work the maker presents his product, not himself, whereas in an action the actor is revealed as the one who is behind the doing. See, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

12. Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 87.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

14. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard, A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 250.

15. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 161.

16. Polanyi, *Meaning*, p. 100.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-559.

22. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1959).

23. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 159.