

# POLANYI'S VIEW OF RELIGION IN *PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE*: A RESPONSE TO RICHARD GELWICK

by Harry Prosch

*Abstract.* This paper shows from a close textual study that, although Michael Polanyi used the term "reality" in a generically similar way for what provided the external pole in the natural sciences, mathematics, art, and religion, he consistently made, in *Personal Knowledge* as well as in later published and unpublished works, a distinction between realities existing *independently* of our articulate systems in the natural sciences and those existing only *in* the articulate systems of mathematics, art, and religion. This difference is shown to be the basis for a controversy as to whether or not he should be regarded as a Christian.

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It is quite a surprise to find that Richard Gelwick thinks that *Meaning* supports his view that the kind of reality dealt with in religion is no different from the one dealt with in the sciences because it supports the notion that both of them exist prior to and independent of our thought.<sup>1</sup> Most critics, including Marjorie Grene, have been severely critical of *Meaning* for doing quite the opposite, that is, for introducing a split in Michael Polanyi's view of reality which had not been there before. It is ironic that most of the passages Gelwick quotes from *Meaning* in support of his view were in fact written by me! They do not appear in Polanyi's lectures on "Acceptance of Religion." These passages were written to show that, although there are two different notions of reality in science and in art and religion, both nonetheless fit Polanyi's often expressed definition of reality as that from which we expect indeterminant properties to arise in the future, properties of which we have not yet dreamed. These properties have, as it were, a life and development of their own which we can neither control nor anticipate; they are not products of our subjective whims or fancies.

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[*Zygon*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March 1982).]

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It seems best to me, however, not to deal with Gelwick's paper point by point but rather to show the basis for my views directly from Polanyi's own statements. Moreover, I shall do this directly from *Personal Knowledge*, in order to avoid any suspicion that I have put such views into Polanyi's pen because of my part in the writing of *Meaning*. Anyhow the only shred of reality, in the sense of existence independently of us, that God has in Polanyi's later thought is the gradient of deeper meaning which seems to evoke the achievement of greater meaning in all life and thought.<sup>2</sup> However, the existence of this gradient is admittedly speculative; also it is not the God of any religion. The inclusion of such a gradient in our science of biology could only serve the purposes of theology by providing us with a way of understanding natural science that would not leave the faith of religion (that the world is meaningful) absurd scientifically. This gradient cannot provide scientific support for the factual or independent reality of any supernatural (or even transnatural) beings.

Religion, Polanyi said in his *Personal Knowledge*, is similar to mathematics and art in its relation to "external experience." "External experience is indispensable," he said "both to mathematics and art, *as their theme*" (italics in original). His point was that these disciplines are related to experience but that *corroboration* from external experience is not required in mathematics and art as it is in the natural sciences. To someone who is "prepared to inhabit their framework," they "convey their own internal thought, and it is for the sake of this internal experience that his mind accepts their framework as its dwelling place." Polanyi then added that "religion stands in a similar relation to non-religious experience."<sup>3</sup>

According to *Personal Knowledge*, religion builds up its own universe, using secular experiences as its "raw material." A convert surrenders "to the religious ecstasy" that the "articulate framework of worship and doctrine" evokes and he "accredits thereby its validity." This, Polanyi added, is "analogous to the process of validation" in art. It therefore seemed to him to be the religious ecstasy evoked by the whole framework of our religion that validates our religious thought, rather than our ability to verify our thought by reference to some intuitive contact with some reality preexisting independently of our discovery of it.<sup>4</sup> God "exists," Polanyi held, "in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise; not as a fact—any more than truth, beauty or justice exist as facts. All these, like God, are things which can be appreciated only in serving them."<sup>5</sup>

This language is in sharp contrast to the way he earlier in that book had talked about the referent of science. He said scientific theories claim "to represent empirical reality." Part of a scientific theory's ground for this is its calling "attention to its own beauty," and it is in

this sense indeed “akin to a work of art which calls attention to its own beauty as a token of artistic reality.” However, it is clear from the context that these are not the same kinds of “reality.” One he was careful to call “empirical,” the other “artistic.”<sup>6</sup>

He later on informed us of what he meant by “empirical.” “An empirical statement is true to the extent to which it reveals an aspect of reality . . . hidden to us, and *existing therefore independently of our knowing it. . . .* 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*” (italics in original).<sup>7</sup> This function of “reality” in our assertions, it is true, is the same in any sort of articulate enterprise. He indicated that all articulate systems—even those which he claimed we could validate rather than verify—“claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker.”<sup>8</sup> This keeps them from being merely subjective and imbues them all with universal intent. Yet, there are important differences in the kind of expectations we have that the externally real entity will exhibit yet undreamed of properties (which, as we have seen, is for him what enables us to call it a “reality”). “In the natural sciences,” he said, “the feeling of making contact with reality is an augury of as yet undreamed of future *empirical* confirmations of an immanent discovery; in mathematics [and we could add, from what he has said before, also in art and religion] it betokens an indeterminate range of future *germinations within mathematics* [and *mutadis mutandi*, within art and religion] *itself*” (italics added).<sup>9</sup> The kinds of realities which are disclosed in these different systems of thought are therefore different. He said specifically that in mathematics “disclosure is of a pre-existing possibility for the satisfaction” “of pre-existing standards of intellectual merit,” established within mathematics itself. “All this applies of course,” he added, “*emphatically to artistic innovations,*” and all this is specifically in contrast to the revelation of “something that already existed,” with which we deal in science.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier in *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi clearly had stated: “Artistic beauty is a token of artistic reality, in the same sense in which mathematical beauty is a token of mathematical reality. Its appreciation has universal intent, and bears witness beyond that to the presence of an inexhaustible fund of *meaning in it* which future centuries may yet illicit” (italics added).<sup>11</sup> The bearing of natural science on facts of experience,” he went on to say, “is much more specific than that of mathematics, religion or the various arts. It is justifiable, therefore, to speak of the verification of science by experience in a sense which would not apply to other articulate systems. The process [in these latter] . . . is a process of *validation*” (italics in original).<sup>12</sup> “Religion . . . [and] the great intellectual systems such as mathematics, fiction and

the fine arts . . . are validated by becoming happy dwelling places of the human mind," in spite of the fact, he added, that "the force of religious conviction does depend on factual evidence and can be affected by doubt concerning certain facts."<sup>13</sup> How does it?

To begin, the true "Christian enquiry," Polanyi claimed, is not theology but "worship." Further, "religious worship can say nothing that is true or false." It is rather a "framework expressing its acceptance of itself as a dwelling place of the passionate search for God. . . . Only a Christian," therefore, "who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and . . . enter into the religious meaning of the Bible."<sup>14</sup>

What then is theology for Polanyi if it is not "Christian enquiry"? "It is," he said, "a theory of religious knowledge and a corresponding ontology of the things thus known. As such, theology reveals, or tries to reveal, the implications of religious worship." It can be "true or false," therefore, "but only as regards its adequacy in formulating and purifying pre-existing religious faith."<sup>15</sup>

Theology and the Bible however, said Polanyi, make statements. "Can their statements," he asked, "be said to be true or false?" "The answer is neither yes nor no."<sup>16</sup> The truth of theology, he quoted Paul Tillich as maintaining, "is to be judged by criteria which lie within the dimension of revelatory knowledge" and this he said, was a confirmation of his own conception of "progressive Protestant theology."<sup>17</sup>

Polanyi's answer to his own question about whether or not a theology is true was *neither* yes nor no. If we assume that Polanyi meant that religion, like art and mathematics, cannot meaningfully be said to be true or false, since its statements cannot be understood to describe empirical facts in the universe, then what he said in *Personal Knowledge* would appear to agree very well with his later views. It also would fit with his distinction between these articulate systems and those of the natural sciences which provided the basis, as we have seen, for his contention, made already in *Personal Knowledge*, that these nonscientific, articulate systems were subject only to *validation* and not to *verification* as was natural science.

We must, however, bring this notion of his meaning into line with his statement quoted above that religious conviction does "depend on factual evidence." "The two kinds of findings, the religious and the natural," Polanyi held, "bypass each other." He went on to explain that "the Christian faith does not express the assertion of observable facts and consequently you cannot prove or disprove Christianity by experiments *or factual records*." He then applied this view to belief in miracles. If one could "experimentally verify" the "conversion of water into wine or the resuscitation of the dead" one could only show that the event is a natural one, not a *supernatural* one. "Observation,"

he said, “may supply us with rich clues for our belief in God; but any scientifically convincing observation of God would turn religious worship into an idolatrous worship of a mere object, or natural person” (italics added).<sup>18</sup>

How then can religious conviction depend at all upon factual evidence? Polanyi did not elaborate upon his statement that it does. It appears that he thought that what religion does is to invest certain events with “supernatural significance.” However, he pointed out that whether or not such an event so invested has *taken place at all* “must be established by factual evidence.” If there is no such evidence, it cannot, of course, be invested with “supernatural significance,” nor with any other sort of significance. It never existed. Biblical criticism, therefore, Polanyi held, can shake—or corroborate—“certain facts which form the main themes of Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet Polanyi did not regard the existence of such factual evidence as the *sine qua non* for convictions concerning religion. His next sentence after the one quoted above clearly indicates this: “But evidence that a fact has not occurred may sometimes leave largely unimpaired the religious truth conveyed by a narrative describing its occurrence.” His example is the creation narrative of Genesis. This, although the evidence against its occurrence, he seemed to imply, is overwhelming “remains a far more intelligent [meaningful?] account of the nature and origin of the universe than the representation of the world as a chance collocation of atoms.” The “biblical cosmology [expresses]—however inadequately—the significance of the fact that the world exists and that man has emerged from it, while the scientific picture denies any meaning to the world, and indeed ignores all our most vital experience of this world.” He indicated in *Personal Knowledge* that his own interpretation of “the scientific study of evolution” can be seen to be a clue to God. Even this perception is not, however, in any sense a “factual” proof of God. The “proof”—the validity of the religious view—rests in the way in which it can provide a “happy dwelling place” for our human minds.<sup>20</sup> Polanyi thus found that his views are confirmed by Tillich’s, as we have seen. Although Tillich pointed to the importance of revelation and found that it is mediated through historical events, he held it is not exposed to critical analysis by historical research, since it does not imply factual assertion. As Polanyi might say, its findings are established, like those of mathematics and art, by their agreement with criteria *within* their own dimensions.<sup>21</sup>

I recall trying, myself, upon several occasions (once when he was preparing some of the lectures on which *Meaning* was later based) to convince Polanyi that no religion could be founded without its including somewhere in its lore the notion of its own *real* supernatural origin and that the supernatural was therefore a necessary feature of

any religion which became a "going concern." I was never able to succeed in getting him to admit this. He really had a difficult time understanding a belief in the factual reality of the religiously supernatural as anything much more than magic or superstition. His own view of the magnificent sweep of religion, in particular the Christian (minus the supernatural), seemed to belie this necessity. He was enthralled by the imaginative, transnatural union of incompatibles involved in Christianity and did not seem to find the supernatural elements in this vision to be any more necessary to hold as statements of fact or of reality than he found the "story" in poems and plays necessary to hold as statements of fact or reality. Thus neither poetry nor religion seemed to him to be important sources for further historical or scientific knowledge of realities preexisting somehow independently of our own existence, or to rest for their validity upon such knowledge.

The only other scholar I know to have made this point about Polanyi is Terence Kennedy, who says that "honesty demands that we acknowledge that Polanyi was not religiously committed nor did he have religious faith as this is understood in Christian theology." Polanyi bent "his whole strength," says Kennedy, "to opening the door to religion and to showing the philosophical legitimacy of religious knowing." For him, Kennedy tells us, religion "is the highest reach of man's mental existence;" but "it has no genuinely objective, historical reference. . . . It is rather an extension of the world of art and its meaning does not go radically beyond the symbols and myths of ancient cultures."<sup>22</sup>

Kennedy says that a number of people have "treated Polanyi as a man of Christian faith in its full realism in spite of his declared contrary intention." He mentions Richard C. Gelwick, Joao C. Keidann, and Richard C. Prust.<sup>23</sup> He thinks that Thomas Torrance "recognizes how Polanyi's theories are agnostic about the fully ontological powers of religion" and has "made justified adjustments to Polanyi's theory of myth and religion."<sup>24</sup>

Although Kennedy generally thinks very highly of Polanyi's philosophical thought, he is distressed that Polanyi did not show us where his transcendent "values exist independent of our thinking them." (Note the general assumption here that to be a reality at all something must exist *independent* of our thought—even if what we are talking about are moral values.) Kennedy thinks that Polanyi should have grounded his values in the being of a transcendent God. In effect, he thinks that Polanyi should have gone on to finish his thought somewhat in the direction that Torrance took.<sup>25</sup>

Was Polanyi really a Christian? What defines a Christian? He was not, of course, as Kennedy defines a Christian. At one point Polanyi

did seem to think of himself as a fully practicing Christian. When I knew him he obviously was not one. Even as early as 1948 there seemed to have been some doubt in his own mind. In a letter to his friend Joseph H. Oldham (of the Moot), dated 31 May, 1948 he admitted that "Our meetings leave me increasingly with the feeling that I have no right to describe myself as a Christian."<sup>26</sup>

Among his collected papers there exists also this statement:

The hopes of Tillich to see divinity as beyond any coherent entity corresponds to my own perspective. It was in 1963 that I attended some lectures by Tillich at Berkeley and at one of the churches attached to the same area. I spent a few hours with Tillich in the evening following the second lecture, telling him a little about my work, to which he answered "you have done for science what I have done for religion." This was a matter of courtesy, but it did hold some substance. The *vision of an indeterminate meaning, which floats beyond all materially structured experiences, exists on the lines of a stratified sequence ultimately pointing at unsubstantial existence.*

I would follow this aspect of religion by a theory of mythical experience. It is in this way an extension of the transnatural existence possessed by the arts. But when I moved in this direction when talking to Tillich, he exclaimed opposition by pointing at a young clergyman facing us across the table and telling me "but I have to tell this young man and thousands like him what to say from the pulpit next Sunday." Obviously the link is unmade, but I believe its traces can be perceived in vision within a stratified universe.<sup>27</sup>

"The link is unmade." Does this mean that the theologians—even Tillich—still want to have it both ways: still want God not to be a "coherent entity" but yet need Him to be one?

Finally there are also a few lines entitled "Of Self Giving," possibly written about 1972:

The transnatural imagination differs from the natural imagination by lacking the indeterminate expectations that will confirm its reality. We dwell in the transnatural by using its detached existence as a refuge from the natural flow of our lives. And we hope to be carried away ever again by the magic of its art.

The transnatural existence of art can be duplicated by a festivity, but it acquires an additional feature in religion. The transnatural becomes supernatural; it is relied upon to manifest itself indefinitely in experiences affecting natural events. Thus the power of prayer, of religious services and all solemn devotions can be said to carry us away and deeply engulf us, but these emotions can only guide us to a religious faith, for they might speak of God as of an imaginary person: as of a possibility and not as an actual fact.

But it is wrong to deprecate the worship which absorbs us emotionally without affirming the supernatural reality of God. God would not refuse to listen to such devotion.<sup>28</sup>

All this certainly seems to me to show that Polanyi did not think of God as a kind of reality which existed independently of our articulate systems, as he thought the subject matters of the natural sciences did. The question remains whether or not he *should* have thought that

God existed as such a reality; but it does not appear to me he did. What this means about his Christianity I must leave to those who know such things.

## NOTES

1. This seems to be a time for surprises. Richard Gelwick says he was surprised at the differences in our views. I am surprised that he had read the text of *Meaning* before its publication (Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975]). No one had ever told me of this. My acknowledgement of Gelwick in the book was only a general, courtesy one, since I knew that he often had discussed matters of religion with Polanyi. So far as I knew, however, he had had nothing to do with the text of *Meaning*. Polanyi suggested changes of wording in three or four sentences in my draft of the work as we looked it over together before he signed the contract to publish. I incorporated those changes in the final draft submitted to the publisher. None of these were in the parts relating to religion. As a matter of fact I have a hand written note from Polanyi saying, "This is just a line to tell you my delight about your section on Religion." He never commented further on it. I took it he thought that section was sufficiently satisfactory to him, although it went far beyond his notes on "Acceptance of Religion," for his lectures at the University of Texas and the University of Chicago in 1969. A second surprise is learning from Gelwick's paper that Polanyi was baptized Roman Catholic. I had never been able to get out of him what he was. He seemed not to want to talk about his own religious experiences or beliefs. From remarks in Michael Polanyi, *Logic of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), as well as from other works of his, I would have thought he was Protestant.

2. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), pp. 87-92. Polanyi and Prosch, pp. 172-81.

3. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 283.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 283-84.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 283n. His quotation is from Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (London: Nisbet & Co., 1953), p. 144.

18. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 284.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-85.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 283n.

22. Terence Kennedy, *The Morality of Knowledge* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Lateranensis, 1979), pp. 138-40.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 139n.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 193-94.

26. Collected papers of Michael Polanyi, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Box 15.

27. *Ibid.*, Box 38.

28. *Ibid.*, Box 41.