

# Michael Polanyi: A Post-Critical Understanding of Religious Belief<sup>1</sup>

DONALD A. D. THORSEN

The character of religious belief remains one of the most disputed topics in religious studies. Throughout the centuries the understanding of religious belief has vacillated between about as many theories on the subject as there are philosophers and theologians propounding them. Each theory attempted to give the truest conception of the nature or function of religious belief. From the mystical claims of religious certitude to the skeptic's critique that understanding is impossible in terms of certainty and verification, all have tried to rightly divide the relationship between faith and reason.

Since the Enlightenment this relationship has been plagued by the "critical" epistemological foundation or paradigm on which it generally was based. At the core of the epistemological problems lies Kant's bifurcated conception of reality, consisting of phenomenal and noumenal realms discontinuous with one another. Based on this perceived dichotomy, faith and reason are thought to function irrespective of one another. Since the time of Kant the majority of Christian philosophers and theologians have had difficulty bridging this chasm between faith and reason.

Michael Polanyi, a Hungarian physicist-philosopher, posed an alternative understanding of religious belief not based upon Kant's critical philosophy. Polanyi accomplished this task by arguing for a change in the contemporary paradigm of the knowing process. Through the development of an alternative epistemological foundation, Polanyi further argued for a post-critical understanding of religious belief that did not bifurcate faith and reason as did Kant's philosophy.

Polanyi wrote most of his philosophy between the late 1940s and the early 1960s. His work has been utilized in the sciences and behavioral sciences as well as in theology. Although Polanyi captured the attention of many with his conceptual contribution to contemporary philosophical and theological questions, he has yet to receive full recognition for his work. Perhaps it is

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*Donald A. D. Thorsen has completed work for three master's degrees and is currently finishing a Ph.D. at Drew University. He has presented papers at the 1980 Conference on Moral Development, the American Academy of Religion (1983), and the Free Methodist Theological Graduate Seminar (1984). Thorsen has taught at Drew University and as adjunct professor at Montclair State College. He is currently instructor in theology at Asbury Theological Seminary.*

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because Polanyi was a germinal thinker, leaving it to others to draw out more explicit implications of his thought.<sup>2</sup> Thus the intent of this article is to present an introductory exposition of Polanyi's epistemology and to discuss its implications specifically for understanding religious belief. To accomplish this task it is necessary to argue for a change in the contemporary paradigm of the knowing process, present Polanyi's alternative to Kant's critical understanding of epistemology, and then discuss the effect such a provision makes upon our understanding of religious belief and a rapprochement between faith and reason. It is hoped that this article will not only provide meaningful insights into the Christian understanding of religious belief, but also be suggestive of the application Polanyi's thought has to offer to the greater realm of theology.

### THE NEED FOR A NEW EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM

For the past two centuries epistemology generally followed the model of the physics that achieved the great discoveries in astronomy and mechanics, thrusting our world into its present scientific era. This era was characterized by an increasing propensity towards objectivity, materialism, detachment and other characteristics which demanded that all knowledge, including our knowledge of the knowing process itself, be explicitly formulated with methodical rigor. John Apczynski in his book, *Doers of the Word*, observes:

Everything that was to be known about the world could now be known through exact operations, open to all for verification, and could be expressed in unequivocal language. This was explicit in the Neutonian world-machine and was explicitly proffered by Laplace.<sup>3</sup>

Intellectually this epistemological view of reality found its fulfillment in the writings of Kant at the end of the eighteenth century. The ensuing phenomenal/noumenal dichotomy labored under a conception of knowledge that demanded complete objectivity. Although this is a somewhat generalized conception of Kant's epistemology, it does clarify how subjective or personal input into the knowing process was thought to do nothing more than obscure the true meaning of things.

Jerry Gill in his book, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge*, thinks that we have reached a stalemate between conflicting epistemological emphases based upon a separation of the objective dimension of knowledge and the subjective dimension, of "facts" and "values."<sup>4</sup> From Gill's perspective this stalemate has come to a head between two equally important, but mutually exclusive points of view: positivism and existentialism. Gill states:

The nature of this stalemate consists in the fact that each of these two points of view stresses one major aspect of human experience and reality to the exclusion of the other. The empiricist movement in

philosophy and the 'positivist' movement in theology both stress the priority of cognition over valuation. The existentialist movement in these two fields focuses on the priority of valuation over cognivity.<sup>5</sup>

Because of this stalemate, progress in the development of certain issues such as religious belief stand at an impasse. As a result a new paradigm is needed both in terms of establishing an adequate epistemology which enables us to cope with this stalemate, and subsequently of formulating an understanding of religious belief which allows a rapprochement between faith and reason.

### POLANYI'S ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM

Michael Polanyi argued that while cognitive claims and rational support are both necessary to religious belief, there is a type of reasoning which is viable even though it is neither a priori nor inductive in any strict sense. In offering his alternative paradigm of the knowing process, Polanyi not only believed he was truer to the actual way in which all people gain understanding—including those involved in science and technology—he also believed he could significantly contribute to the advancement of understanding religious matters. His contribution centrally evolves around the concept of "tacit knowing."

Polanyi regarded knowing as an active comprehension of things—an action that requires skill. Skillful knowing and doing is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skillful achievement, whether practical or theoretical. In using such clues/tools, we act with only a tacit awareness or knowledge of them, but they remain essential to the knowing process. For example, when we use a tool, such as a hammer or a dental probe, it is not consciously specifiable on our palm and fingers. We are aware of the tool only in terms of its action on its object, that is on the comprehensive entity into which we integrate it. Thus, says Polanyi, the impact of a tool on one's hands is integrated to form one's perceptions: "the integrated stimuli are noticed at a distance removed outward from the point where they impinge on us."<sup>6</sup>

Other examples of skillful knowing and doing include bicycle riding and the use of sensory organs, such as the way in which we learn to visually perceive things. Our intellectual perception also follows this pattern. When reading, a person follows the marks on a page as clues/tools, relying on them in order to attend to the meaning of the word or words—to attend, in fact, indirectly to the person who wrote them.<sup>7</sup> Even in scientific investigations analogous structures take place in the knowing process. The capacity of scientists to perceive nature differs from ordinary perception only by the fact that it can integrate a greater number of refined scientific clues/tools unavailable to ordinary perception. Scientific knowing is crucial to Polanyi because it, better

than anything else, consists in discerning gestalten that indicate a true coherence of dimensional reality in nature.<sup>8</sup>

According to Polanyi, particulars are noticed in two ways. First, we focus attention on isolated particulars only. We remain uncomprehendingly or tacitly aware of clues/tools used in the process, thinking ourselves to be objective and unattached from that which is known. But Polanyi insisted that what we actually do and cognitively should do is look at particulars as participating in a comprehensive entity that is the process of being known. Thus, Polanyi maintained that people utilize both explicit and tacit processes in their perception and understanding, needing both in terms of their contribution to the whole.

It is through such a process of knowing that science and scientific investigation takes place. When one formulates a hypothesis such as  $E=mc^2$ , one cannot always state that such a hypothesis is based on factual data. Rather one relies upon a certain tacit knowledge whereby one considers such a hypothesis a reasonable direction to take. Through various influences and experiences, one gains new perspectives and insights into the nature of reality.

Polanyi referred to the personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding as “indwelling.”<sup>9</sup> It is as though the knowing participant indwells the reality in which one lives by assimilating, both focally and subsidiarily, clues/tools which help one to perceive the many splendid aspects of life—the fantastic, the mysterious. But this does not make our understanding subjective. Although it is true that there is an objective and subjective pole in personal knowledge, Polanyi maintained it is not subjective because we generally experience something real through our tacit awareness!<sup>10</sup> Thus, there is not a chasm but a continuum in the knowing process by which something or someone is known.<sup>11</sup> Through personal, active participation in the knowing process we become aware of more than what is focally capable of being conceptualized. Although we may not be aware of it, we encounter a great many actual experiences in life which are available and usable; in a sense, the objective world “speaks” if only we would train our skills of perceiving and understanding what it has to tell. People are not, as Kant said, the sole arbiters of truths.<sup>12</sup>

At this point one might argue from a religious perspective that even if our subjective understanding is valid, we still would be unable to “discern the spirits.” In response to this counter argument, Polanyi would maintain that an adequate idea of comprehension is lacking which clarifies the means by which an individual can discern the spirits. Comprehension, Polanyi argued, is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity.<sup>13</sup> Kant considered universal validity discernable only by appropriating objective reality. But Polanyi considered active,

intentional problem-solving/knowing activities to be revelatory when responsibly undertaken. They are revelatory of a host of specifically non-objective true implications—implications based on actual perceptions of which we previously may have been only tacitly aware. Thus, our knowledge is not subjective because we genuinely experience something through our tacit awareness.<sup>14</sup>

Such knowing is objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality; it is contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indeterminate range of yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications.<sup>15</sup> We reach these higher levels or syntheses through the use of our intuitive faculties. We progress to higher levels of reality by intuitively “indwelling” or immersing ourselves in clues/tools of perception to gain a knowledge of the whole. Correspondingly, Polanyi described this fusion of the personal and the objective as “personal knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

Personal knowledge involves an intellectual commitment, and as such, says Polanyi, is inherently hazardous. Only affirmations that could be false can be said to convey objective knowledge of this kind. Polanyi was aware that belief and reliance upon this subjective element is unsatisfactory to those who have for so long sought infallible certitude. However, because of the personal participation he described as necessary for an active, responsible act of comprehension, Polanyi admitted that all affirmations—even those published in his book—must reflect one’s personal commitments.<sup>17</sup> But this is not something for which Polanyi would embarrassingly excuse himself. Rather this is inherent within all knowing processes. It is the way to knowledge and understanding. It is the avenue toward discovering truths. Throughout his writings Polanyi tries to make this point clear. All of his examples show that into every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of one’s knowledge.<sup>18</sup> On these premises Polanyi claims to have constructed a system of correlative beliefs which he could sincerely hold. He saw no acceptable alternative which he could affirm with conviction.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF POLANYI’S ALTERNATIVE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM FOR UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS BELIEF

In the foregoing discussion we may recognize that “there are things that we know but cannot tell,”<sup>19</sup> or at least things of which we do not always have an immediate conceptual or explicit awareness. In speaking of the kinds of things known—of things we can tell and of things we cannot tell—we discover that the things we know and *cannot* tell are parts contributing to a whole, while the whole itself, to which they contribute, is something we know and *can* tell.<sup>20</sup> This theory of knowledge shows that our explicit knowledge of a thing invariably relies upon our tacit awareness of other things. Here the key to Polanyi’s thought is again the concept of “indwelling”:

... the act of comprehending a whole is an interiorization of its parts, which makes us dwell in them in a way that is logically similar to the way we dwell in our body.<sup>21</sup>

Indwelling takes place as a result of our having appropriated an external object, for example, letters typed on a piece of paper, for the purpose of attending to something on which this object has a bearing. In the same way the parts of the whole have a bearing on the entity formed by them. The oscillation of detailing and integrating between the parts of the whole and our awareness of the whole itself is the primary means for deepening our understanding of any comprehensive entity.

Polanyi's concept of "understanding" is crucial. It is a word which helps lead him into discussion on the topic of faith and reason.

Understanding, comprehension—this is the cognitive faculty cast aside by a positivistic theory of knowledge, which refuses to acknowledge the existence of comprehensive entities which I recognize as the central act of knowing. For comprehension can never be absent from any proclamation of knowing and is indeed the ultimate sanction of any such act. What is not understood cannot be said to be known.<sup>22</sup>

With Polanyi's revised concept of the knowing process we not only find ourselves with a more adequate epistemology than that provided by Kant, we have one that provides for a rapprochement between faith and reason.

Polanyi considered there to be no other way of approaching a hidden meaning or truth than by entrusting ourselves to our intimations of yet unseen and perhaps inconceivable presences. Such intimations are all considered to be the result of personal acts of faith—faith which is requisite for *all* types of knowing from the lowest levels of appropriating knowledge of objective facts to that of moral and interpersonal understandings. As such Polanyi claimed that faith is an integral component in the proper procedure of all knowledge. This designation of faith as functioning in a way similar to that of our every knowing process results in a rapprochement between faith and reason—a bold claim which is pregnant with implications regarding the relationship between religion and science as well as faith and reason.

Polanyi argued that it is possible to think of religious beliefs or belief as "responsible" in the same way as all knowledge for it operates in the same fashion. "To hold knowledge is indeed always a commitment to indeterminate implications, for human knowledge is but an intimation of reality, and we can never quite tell in what new way reality may yet manifest itself."<sup>23</sup> Because knowledge is spawned by that which is external to us, it is objective. Its future manifestations can never be completely under our control, resulting

in the fact that "all true knowledge is inherently hazardous, just as all true faith is a leap into the unknown."<sup>24</sup> As such Polanyi stated that we can no longer affirm the contemporary division between faith and reason, or faith/religion and science, which reflects the assumption that reason and science proceed by explicit rules of logical deduction or inductive generalization. To explain, Polanyi states:

. . . these operations (logical deduction and inductive generalization) are impotent by themselves, and I could add that they cannot even be strictly defined by themselves. To know is to understand, and explicit logical processes are effective only as tools in search of the solution of a problem, commitment by which we expand our understanding and continue to hold the result. They have no meaning except within this informal dynamic context. Once this is recognized, the contrast between faith and reason dissolves, and the close similarity of this structure emerges in its place.<sup>25</sup>

Religious belief can no longer be thought of in terms of having its own completely unique logic which would render it immune to attack and justification from those standing outside the religious community or religious way of life. Indeed we must see religious belief as a comprehensive entity universal to all who responsibly act in accordance with the reality of the world. But belief in the external world and/or in the reality of other minds is not thought by most people to be universal in the same sense that we would think of religious belief. Gill recognizes this disparity and offers two possible suggestions:

First, from an anthropological point of view, it is not altogether clear that the rejection of religious belief is as widespread and/or authentic as it may appear . . . second, if one conceives of human experience as structured according to a hierarchy of mediated dimensions, it becomes possible to understand the difference between bedrock [a Wittgensteinian term for the structure of experience in general and the basis for rational endeavor] and religious beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

The first suggestion speaks to those who would argue, for example, that the presence of religion only belongs to an outmoded era in human development. Auguste Comte considered the religious characteristics of humanity to belong only to those with a primitivistic worldview. Thought of in this way, religion is fast becoming passe, and certainly there are reasons to respect this view when we see widespread religious unbelief among modern people. Polanyi, however, argued that people never really reject belief in a transcendent or divine dimension. They only exchange one form of transcendence for another. Polanyi pointed to the self-deification of totalitarian Marxist thought as a contemporary example of this.<sup>27</sup> Thus all people have a general awareness of the religious dimension because the same fundamental structure

of reality sustains them all, though there are differences in the explicit ways this structure is actualized.

Gill's second suggestion leads to a view of experience as a network of several simultaneously interpenetrating dimensions of reality.<sup>28</sup> These dimensions or levels form a hierarchy of comprehensive entities, for example, inanimate nature, intelligent behavior of human beings, and moral responsibility. In a hierarchical sequence of comprehensive levels, each higher level is related to the levels below it. We cannot explain the operations of an upper level in terms of the particulars on which its operations rely. This leads to Polanyi's idea of the emergence of humanity. Humanity continually progresses up a ladder of ascending levels of existence.<sup>29</sup> Each higher level of integration represents, in this sense, a higher level of existence, not accountable by the levels below it.

Yet each higher level is known to us by relying on our awareness of the particulars on the level below it. *We know each level by interiorizing its particulars and mentally performing the integration which constitutes it.* This is how all knowledge is based on indwelling; and this is how the consecutive stages of indwelling form a continuous transition from the understanding of the inanimate right up to the understanding of moral responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, as we move from the experiential dimensions of lesser mediation to greater mediation, the possibility of a religious dimension and knowledge of that dimension becomes more apparent and significant. The sort of reasoning that is appropriate, however, becomes more indirect. Therefore Polanyi was concerned that we operate out of an epistemological paradigm or religious framework sufficiently adequate to allow us to perceive the religious dimension. Having an adequate framework from which to attend is crucial. If knowledge comes through the indwelling of certain particulars, we must choose carefully those frameworks which appear to be most fruitful for gaining the knowledge which we desire. As it has been seen, all extension of comprehension involves an expansion of ourselves into a new dwelling place, which we assimilate by relying upon it as we do our own body. Likewise, such action requires both passion and purpose if we desire to find the hidden meaning of things. Thus, Polanyi argued that at some point or points in the ever-developing individual and corporate emergence of humanity there need to be "transformations" to a framework adequate for appropriating knowledge and understanding of higher, perhaps religious, dimensions of reality.<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, religious conversion commits our whole person and changes our whole being in a way that an expansion of natural knowledge does not do.<sup>32</sup>

Such conversions are not necessarily limited in number. Nevertheless, the



transformations are deemed necessary for the advancement of our understanding.

With the foregoing discussion in mind it is not surprising that Polanyi would claim a specific intellectual framework to be particularly fruitful in the comprehension of the religious dimension. To Polanyi Christianity offers an unusually insightful epistemological paradigm not only for the religious dimension but for all dimensions, including science. More specifically, Polanyi considers all acts of knowledge—and the subsequent holding of that knowledge as true—to find their paradigmatic expression in the Pauline scheme of redemption which imposes an obligation to strive for the impossible in the hope of achieving it by divine grace.<sup>33</sup> All paradigms concerned with the act of knowing, including scientific discovery, involve a passionate pursuit of a hidden meaning, guided by intensely personal intimations of this yet unrevealed reality. Such an effort involves intense, absorbing, and devoted labor. Thus:

Here we have a paradigm (i.e., that of Paul) of faith, works and grace. The discoverer works in the belief that his labors will prepare his mind for receiving a truth from sources over which he has no control.<sup>34</sup>

The sort of confirmation appropriate to this kind of religious belief can best be found in returning once again to Polanyi's concept of "indwelling"—always crucial for his epistemology.

Making the pronouncements about the nature of religious language apart from personal involvement in such uses is of no more help than trying to know any dimension of reality, such as music or chemistry, without participating in it.<sup>35</sup>

The only way we are ever in a position to draw conclusions about the truth of some aspect of life is to commit ourselves to it, laboring to discover and anticipating new facts about that aspect of life. The model here, of course, is "personal knowledge." And, just as we never really know another person—especially whether or not that person is trustworthy—until we place ourselves in active relationship to that person, the mode of confirmation will thus be more in the quality of life than in abstract argument.<sup>36</sup>

For Polanyi the making of theological statements such as "God exists" is little more than the endorsement of an act of worship in descriptive terms; something like saying " 'snow is white' is true" after having confidently said "snow is white."<sup>37</sup> Theology to Polanyi is an intricate study of momentous and complex problems. It is both a theory of religious knowledge and a corresponding ontology of the things thus known. Although Polanyi did not write theology *per se*, he did think that theology, pursued as an

“axiomatization” of the Christian faith, has an important analytical task, though its results can be understood only by practicing Christians.<sup>38</sup> Such an endeavor is thought by Polanyi to be of great import in helping Christians to greater self-understanding. Concerning this idea Polanyi states:

Christianity is a progressive enterprise. Our vastly enlarged perspectives of knowledge should open up fresh vistas of religious faith. The Bible and the Pauline doctrine in particular, may be still pregnant with unsuspected lessons; and the greater precision and more conscious flexibility of modern thought, shown by the new physics and the logico-philosophical movements of our age, may presently engender conceptual reforms which will renew and clarify, on the ground of modern extra-religious experience, man’s relation to God. An era of great religious discoveries may lie before us.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, the persistent stalemate between faith and reason may find its clue to rapprochement through Polanyi’s development of an alternative, post-critical approach to the knowing process. Polanyi’s epistemology enables us to gain a new understanding both of the knowing process and the relationship between faith and reason in religious belief. In providing a rapprochement between faith and reason Polanyi argues that he has given a truer and more fruitful conception of the entire knowing process. Such a conception is fruitful both for scientific investigations and—more importantly to this article—for the implications which can be drawn in rethinking theological issues, making both more comprehensive and meaningful. The rapprochement between faith and reason is crucial in arguing that while cognitive claims and rational support are both necessary to religious belief, there is a type of reasoning which is viable even though it is neither a priori nor inductive in any strict sense.<sup>40</sup> Such a rapprochement provides an understanding of religious belief with more intellectual integrity in a world preoccupied with scientific verification and certainty. Furthermore, it provides Christians with a more explicit understanding of how to know and affirm their theological beliefs, especially with regard to knowledge of their full salvation and relationship with God. Polanyi thus provides both intellectual and devotional insight, plus hope for further insight, to those who find that “there are things that we know but cannot tell.”

## Notes

1. A version of this article was first presented as a paper to the Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion at Montclair State College, New Jersey, on March 10, 1985.

2. Most notably T. F. Torrance has worked to draw out the theological implications of Polanyi’s philosophy. Others include John V. Apczynski and Jerry H. Gill to whom this article is indebted both in terms of inspiring interest and of providing direction.

3. John V. Apczynski, *Doers of the Word*, ed. H. Ganse Little, Jr., American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series, No. 18 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 10.
4. Jerry H. Gill, *The Possibility of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 13. For a similar appraisal see Walter Kaufman, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958) and John Apczynski, *Doers of the Word*, p. 11.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
6. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 96ff.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 134ff.
9. Cf. Michael Polanyi, "Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?" *Philosophy Today*, VII (Spring, 1963), p. 7.
10. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 403f.
11. Cf. Gill's discussion of "Religious Knowledge" in *On Knowing God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 141-154.
12. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 106ff.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 396; cf. 22, 189, 238f., 333.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
15. *Ibid.*, p. viif.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
18. Michael Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," *Journal of Religion*, XLI (1961), p. 243.
19. Polanyi, "Science and Religion," p. 4f.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
22. Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," p. 240.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Jerry H. Gill, "Tacit Knowing and Religious Belief," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, VI (Summer, 1975), p. 85.
27. Cf. Polanyi's "Background and Prospect" in *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 7-20.
28. Cf. Gill, *The possibility of Religious Knowledge*, pp. 119-124, and *On Knowing God*, pp. 67-76.
29. Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," p. 246.
30. Polanyi, "Science and Religion," p. 12.
31. Cf. Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," p. 243f.

32. Ibid., p. 244.
33. Polanyi, "Science and Religion," p. 14.
34. Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," p. 247.
35. Gill, "Tacit Knowing," p. 87.
36. Cf. Ibid.
37. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, p. 281.
38. Ibid., p. 282.
39. Ibid., p. 285.
40. Cf. Gill, "Tacit Knowing and Religious Belief," p. 74.