

A Prefatory Note on Polanyi's "Forms of Atheism"

Phil Mullins

Key words: Michael Polanyi, modern atheism, Polanyi's cultural analysis

ABSTRACT

This introduction to Polanyi's little-known 1948 essay "Forms of Atheism" discusses the context in which Polanyi wrote these reflections for a discussion group chaired by J. H. Oldham.

The following short paper by Michael Polanyi, written in 1948, was not published until 1981. It was included in the October 1981 issue of *Convivium* (Newsletter No. 13, pp. 5-13) which was a publication of the British Polanyi study group of the same name. In the early nineties, *Convivium* ceased publication and the *Convivium* group merged with the Polanyi Society. It is almost certainly the case that Polanyi biographer Bill Scott, who was already at work reviewing Polanyi materials, provided the publication copy of this forgotten short essay when it was published.¹ The "News and Notes" section of this issue of *Convivium* mentions that in Polanyi Society meetings in North America at the American Academy of Religion there had been recent discussion of "the different interpretations of Polanyi's views about religious truth" and that this discussion was to be published in an upcoming issue of *Zygon* which would include "Professor W. T. Scott's 'adjudication'" (2).² In sum, Polanyi's 1948 essay was originally published at the time that interesting questions about Polanyi's ontology, and particularly its application to religion, first emerged.

This Polanyi essay has long been out of print and has relapsed into the obscurity of its first thirty-three years of existence. This is an interesting short essay that it now seems timely to re-publish.³ In the last few years, a spate of "popular atheism" books has been published which have sold many copies for their authors and publishers and stirred the waters of controversy. More importantly, scholars like Charles Taylor have provided a searching cultural analysis and criticism of modern forms of atheism in books like *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2007). See, for example, the discussion of what Taylor terms "a new, more nuanced map of the ideological terrain" in which he suggests that there is a three-cornered and—perhaps a four-cornered—struggle in contemporary culture between religious belief, the "humanist primacy of life" vision, and what he calls "the immanent counter-Enlightenment" perspective (636). In a somewhat similar fashion, Wesley Wildman, in *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), recently described the contemporary religious landscape as a contested domain in which there is interaction between supernaturalists, supranaturalists (i.e., those who conceive ultimate reality as an active, aware and purposive personal being), religious naturalists, and anti-religious naturalists (23). It is easy enough to see some affinities between the type of four-fold analysis Polanyi did in 1948 and ideas put forth more recently by Taylor and Wildman.

A word about the original context into which Polanyi's essay fits may be helpful. Polanyi prepared this essay for a December 17-20, 1948 meeting of a group convened by his friend J. H. Oldham where it (along with other papers) was discussed. This was either the ninth or tenth such Oldham-convened

meeting that Polanyi participated in. The earliest ones were in 1944 (June 23-25 and December 15-18) in the group called the Moot which officially dissolved after the death of Karl Mannheim (January 9, 1947), although Oldham began convening other Moot-like groups (some even called the “Moot”) almost immediately. Keith Clements, the Oldham biographer who recently edited *The Moot Papers, Faith, Freedom and Society, 1938-1947* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), has suggested that, after the death of Mannheim, Polanyi’s ideas and writings often were the focus of attention in Oldham’s discussion groups which always included a number of important religious and literary intellectuals (17).

The archival correspondence between Polanyi and Oldham makes clear that Polanyi sent to Oldham most of his essays (including the Riddell Lectures) published in the forties (Box 15, Folders 3-5 in MPP).⁴ Oldham often reported that he found these essays illuminating and he often included them as part of the reading material for his discussion group meetings and he sometimes set aside discussion time on his meeting agendas specifically for treatment of Polanyi’s papers. After first reading “Forms of Atheism,” Oldham wrote to Polanyi “I am profoundly grateful to you for your paper. You could not have written anything that goes more to the heart of the situation or more deserving of discussion by the group” (11 October 1948, Box 15, Folder 4 in MPP). Oldham’s “Note on Agenda” (Box 15, Folder 8 in MPP) sent to those planning to attend the meeting of December 17-20, 1948 suggested that Polanyi’s “Forms of Atheism” should be the lead-off paper presented and discussed on the evening of December 17, 1948 and the following morning of December 18. He also suggested that on December 18, “we might, perhaps, give the evening session to a consideration of what Polanyi says on pp. 1-2 of his paper about the fiduciary mode.”

The meeting on December 17-20, 1948 was a follow-up to some earlier discussion group meetings and often Oldham’s meetings had a rather diffuse topic. In a May 13, 1948 letter to Polanyi, Oldham described the upcoming December meeting as “a continuation of our conversations about God, approached from the standpoint of modern atheisms” (Box 15, Folder 4 in MPP). In this letter, Oldham mentions the possibility of inviting “Father Lubac, the French Jesuit” to this meeting. Oldham had apparently recently read—and Polanyi’s essay confirms that he had also read—Lubac’s *Drame de l’humanisme athée*.

Polanyi’s initial response to Oldham’s comments on the topic of the upcoming December 17-20 meeting is interesting:

I also feel a little at a loss as to how I could contribute to the subject which you suggest. Our meetings leave me increasingly with the feeling that I have no right to describe myself as a Christian. So perhaps I may feel the part of the outsider in the discussion. But my dominant sentiment is really this: Whatever meeting you may call and invite me to, I shall certainly attend. I don’t think the subject will make very much difference to the benefit which I will derive from such a meeting (31 May, 1948, Box 15, Folder 4 in MPP).

Oldham’s response of June 1, 1948 (Box 15, Folder 4 in MPP) assured Polanyi that the shape of the upcoming meeting was still open and would remain so until he talked further with Polanyi. Polanyi’s later letter to Oldham (25 June, 1948, Box 15, Folder 4 in MPP) proposed that he was “restive about the combination of Marxism and Biblicism” that he increasingly found in writings of members of Oldham’s groups as well as elsewhere. Polanyi was quite pointed in questioning this linkage and Oldham invited him to formulate his ideas in a paper for the December 17-20, 1948 meeting. Apparently, Polanyi wrote

“Forms of Atheism” only after reading Lubac’s book, as well as studying some of the other material prepared by others for the December meeting.

ENDNOTES

¹Drusilla Scott, who put together this issue of *Convivium*, wrote to Bill Scott on March 9, 1981 and her letter suggests that she had received a copy of “Forms of Atheism” from Bill Scott. I am indebted to Marty Moleski, S.J. for a copy of excerpts from Drusilla Scott’s letter.

²Drusilla Scott is referring to what became known in the Polanyi literature as the “Gelwick-Prosch” debate. In 1979 in *Ethics* (82 [January 1979]: 211–216), Harry Prosch reviewed Richard Gelwick’s *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004) and criticized Gelwick’s account of Polanyi’s ontology. This led to lively discussions at two Polanyi Society annual meetings in the early eighties and articles in *Zygon* 17:1 (March 1982) in which matters concerned with Prosch’s interpretation of Polanyi and his role in co-authoring *Meaning* were debated. In 1985, Drusilla Scott’s *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* (Lewes, Sussex: Book Guild Limited, 1985; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) was published and Prosch also reviewed her book (*Tradition and Discovery* 13:2 [1985–86]: 20–22), raising questions similar to those raised about Gelwick’s book. In 1986, Prosch’s *Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986) was published and it outlined his reading of Polanyi’s ontology, repeated his criticisms of figures like Gelwick and Scott and even extended his account of Polanyi to criticize what he took to be Marjorie Grene’s misreading of Polanyi. In sum, Polanyi’s ontology and particularly its applicability to the realities of the noosphere has been hotly debated; although the early discussion was in the eighties, questions about Polanyi’s ontology have regularly resurfaced in more recent scholarly discussion about topics like Polanyi’s realism (see *Tradition and Discovery* 26:3 [1999-2000]) and his account of the levels of reality (see *Tradition and Discovery* 39:2 [2012-2013] and 40:1 [2013-2014]).

³Thanks go to Professor John Polanyi for granting permission to make the essay easily accessible in *Tradition and Discovery* and as a part of the collection of Polanyi essays on the Polanyi Society web site.

⁴Archival materials are in the Papers of Michael Polanyi (MPP) in the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, 1100 East 57th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.