

The Tacit Victory and the Unfinished Agenda

[EDITOR'S NOTE: *The comments below are by one of the panelists who spoke at the November 22, 1991 Polanyi centennial banquet held in conjunction with the Polanyi Society meeting at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The last issue of TAD carried comments by five panelists who were part of a similarly titled session at the April 1991 Kent State conference; speakers at both the banquet and the Kent State session were asked to comment on the relevance of Polanyi's thought to issues and discussions in their particular areas of interest.]*

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MICHAEL POLANYI & CATHOLIC THOUGHT

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It seemed a good idea when I was asked to prepare a brief presentation for the occasion of the Polanyi centennial celebration on the topic of Michael Polanyi and Catholic thought. It became a more daunting undertaking upon reflection, however, and it eventually became clear to me that to take Polanyi and Catholic thought as my title would be rather presumptuous, particularly given the time constraints on my remarks. I ask you, therefore, to take the qualifiers (some reflections on) in my revised title quite literally.

In order to appreciate the importance of Michael Polanyi's post-critical philosophy for Catholic theology and his continuing relevance to those of us currently engaged in this enterprise, it is necessary, first, to recall briefly some recent religious history.

It is well known how, through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church and the main stream of its theology took up a more or less defensive posture towards the age of enlightenment and modern science. The upshot of this was that -- in contrast to the experience taking place within Protestant Christianity -- a meaningful confrontation between the Catholic world and modernity was delayed for almost two hundred years until the second half of the twentieth century. And when the conditions were finally present to allow that confrontation to occur (in the world we call post-Vatican II), its impact was sudden and overwhelming. The Catholic tradition of thought and

practice experienced a crisis which shook it (to borrow a phrase from Paul Tillich) to its very foundations. Langdon Gilkey's *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* provides an insightful and sympathetic Protestant account of this critical moment in Catholic thought.

The confrontation raised two theological exigencies for Catholics struggling to meet the challenge of modernity: the first was simply to understand and come to terms with modern science and modern freedoms; the second was to appropriate them and ground theology itself as a legitimate and responsible cognitive endeavor. Thus, questions of foundation and methodology took center stage in Catholic thought through the 1960's and 70's just as Polanyi's post-critical philosophy was beginning to have a significant impact on modernity's own self-understanding.

The crisis for Catholicism was deeply rooted in both the theory and the practice of the world of modern science which it encountered. The theoretical component was a scientific vision of a closed and one-dimensional universe of interrelated causes and effects which had no place for transcendence or the *object* of theological reflection. As Huston Smith observed two years ago in a plenary address here at the AAR, modernity collapsed the "ontological hierarchy" of religion. (*JAAR*, p. 657) At the same time, the practical component was a positivistically perceived scientific method that included a paradigm of responsible thinking which, in effect, eliminated the engaged *subject* of theological reflection. In the words of David Tracy: "Reason retreated into a formal and technical rationality." (*Plurality and Ambiguity*, p. 31)

Johann Baptist Metz characterized the impact of modernity upon Catholic thought and practice as a "two-fold reduction," presenting something like a "permanent constitutional crisis" for theology. First there is the *privatistic* reduction of theology in which the logos of theology is entirely concentrated on religion as a private affair. Under pressure of scientific advance, theology is led to surrender the public realm to the so called "objective sciences." Second, there is the *rationalistic* reduction of theology which includes a withering of the imagination and a radical renunciation of symbolism under the oppressive cognitive force of formal abstract reason. (*Different Theologies, Common Responsibility*, p. 14)

Members of the Polanyi society are well aware of the way Polanyi's post-critical thought challenges the modern scientific vision of a closed natural universe and reveals a world of ontological hierarchies governed by principles of marginal control. I need not review that achievement at this time. Nor is it necessary to recount in any detail here how Polanyi deconstructs the positivistic model of formal rationality that has dominated modern thinking and discovers in its place a tacit dimension to all human knowing. However, the enduring legacy (i.e., "the tacit victory") of Polanyi's contribution to the emergence of a new post-modern paradigm, as well as the need to further clarify its significance (i.e., the "unfinished agenda"), can be seen, I believe, in the efforts of contemporary Catholic theologians to overcome the modern identity-crisis of Christianity through an understanding and appropriation of this new paradigm. For if there is one thing post-critical thought has made imminently clear to Catholic theologians, it is the necessity to encounter modernity dialectically. Certainly, what contemporary Catholics do not want, having so recently opened up to the modern world, is to fall back behind those advances in critical reflection and political freedom which the enlightenment has already brought forth. I simply want to call attention, therefore, to the work of theologians like Hans Kung, David Tracy, Matthew Lamb, Johann Metz, Rosemary Ruether, Anne Carr among others who are charting a course for Catholic theology within what could be called the fiduciary framework of a new post-critical paradigm.

At a recent international and ecumenical symposium on the topic of "paradigm change in theology" Hans Kung, David Tracy and Matthew Lamb provided the major preparatory papers which sketch the modern problematic

and point a way out in the direction indicated by the paradigm of post-critical thought. Hans Kung draws upon paradigm analysis itself not only as an analogue for understanding the current crisis in Catholicism but to suggest possibilities for reconstructing the entire history of theology. In his essay, David Tracy explores some of the hermeneutical presuppositions of post-critical thought. It is Matthew Lamb, however, who finds the most explicit parallels between developments in the new post-critical paradigm initiated by Polanyi's thought and current developments in Catholic theology.

Lamb is specifically interested in providing a post-critical account of the turn to praxis, and ideology-critique so evident in the emergence of political and liberation theologies. He finds significance in the way post-critical philosophy in general and Polanyi in particular has made it possible to call into question the fundamental self-understanding of modernity with its illusory dichotomy between science and ideology, while deftly avoiding a lapse into relativism or epistemological anarchy. (*Paradigm Change in Theology*, p. 65.) According to Lamb, neither critical rationalists such as Karl Popper who tend to associate value commitments and the praxis of science with the "irrational," nor critical anarchists, such as Paul Feyerabend who tend to regard the concerns of post-critical thought as overly "rationalist," are able to transcend the fundamental dichotomy of modernity.

Underlying the modern science-ideology distinction is an enlightenment bifurcation of value-free scientific rationality and pre-rational or irrational value commitments. This in turn is rooted in the more fundamental dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity. Post-critical philosophy exposes the contradictory presupposition fostering this dichotomy--a desire to eliminate the subject of knowledge entirely and reconstruct the methods of science into formally logical, a-historical procedures of pure objectivity. Polanyi's own effort to overcome the dichotomy of scientific-objectivity and moral-subjectivity takes the form of an account of the structure of tacit knowing in which a dialectical interplay between conscious praxis and thematized knowledge is evident. The post-critical shift from scientific objectivism to the questioning praxis of scientific communities provides insights for understanding similar developments taking place in contemporary Catholic thought. In Lamb's opinion, such a post-critical understanding is not possible for instance if one remains fixated on typically modern "conservative-liberal" or "fideist-rationalist" dichotomies (*Paradigm Change*, pp. 63-109).

Recently, Lawrence Cunningham pointed out how Catholic theology is generally characterized today by two adjectives: "pluralist" and "historical" (*The Catholic Heritage*, p. 118). What Kung, Tracy, Lamb and the entire symposium on paradigm change in theology suggest is a unifying fiduciary framework which provides criteria for limiting the pluralism and transcending the historicism. Within this framework or post-modern paradigm, the Catholic theologian's relationship to the authoritative faith tradition, on the one hand, and to the dominant culture of modernity, on the other, can be seen as dialectical. Catholic theology is at once both "interpretation and criticism" as Edward Schillebeeckx has argued. (*The Understanding of Faith*) More importantly, it carries out this dialectic of engagement and distancing; of dwelling-within and breaking-out; of trust and suspicion, *vis a vis* both the ecclesiastical tradition and the modern scientific world.

In the light of this new paradigm, in other words, post-critical Catholic theology's own self-understanding has come to mean accepting a two-fold responsibility: 1.) The first task is to *uncover ideological distortions* within religious tradition and modern culture alike through a disclosure of their tacit pre-suppositions; this could mean revealing how what was once regarded simply as a faith tradition is, on the contrary, a "white" or "male," or "middle-class," or "clerical" tradition; or it could mean revealing how what was previously taken to be a universal

manifestation of enlightened freedom or rationality is, on the contrary, an oppressive form of social manipulation or control by the dominant culture. 2.) The second responsibility is to *articulate a new hermeneutic offaith* which avoids these ideological pitfalls by acknowledging the primacy of praxis in one's theology and the historical embeddedness of reflection in tradition and community; in other words, by taking personal responsibility for one's knowledge. From a post-critical perspective, a theological tradition continues to be authentic and liberating only to the extent it remains internally self-critical and avoids a reversal of dominative patterns.

Recognition of a tacit dimension in theological reflection led Johann-Baptist Metz to discover what he calls the “subject behind the subject” of enlightenment theology. His account of political theology as a critique of the middle-class subject (i.e., the private, autonomous, self-sufficient individual) and middle-class theologies (i.e., existentialism and positivism) illustrates well the “double dialectic” involved in a post-critical recovery of authentic social subjectivity from the ideological distortions of both religious tradition and modernity. At the same time, Metz’s political theology remains embedded in the narrative memories of a community’s faith experiences. (*Faith In History and Society*, pp. 32-48; 205-218.)

In a post-modern context, Catholic theology can no more avoid a dialectical confrontation with its authoritative past than it can avoid confronting the present world of science and technology. Ideological distortions of both “sacralism” and “secularism” must be critiqued -- and not from some neutral standpoint outside, but from a committed perspective within the worlds of traditional faith and modern science themselves. (*Paradigm Change In Theology*, p. 87.) Polanyi’s post-critical thought has helped make such a critique possible by undermining the dichotomies which separate these two worlds and lead to their ideological distortion.

As a part of the new theological paradigm, political theology attempts to overcome 1.) on the one hand, the *privatization* of religion (i.e., the relegation of faith to an individualistic sphere of subjectivity) and 2.) the *scientization* (or what Weber called “rationalization”) of social life (i.e., the elimination of values from the public sphere and their replacement by instrumental models of objective rationality). The goal of post-critical theology, then, is to restore the public or social dimension to religion (in response to a privatizing of faith which removes the world from the subject) and to restore the personal or value dimension to society (in response to a scientizing or technologizing of society which removes the subject from the world).

Contemporary forms of Catholic liberation theology--from marginalized women, oppressed blacks, the impoverished third world--can be seen likewise to engage in a dialectical critique and recovery of the religious tradition and the modern world. In discussing feminist theology within the new post-modern paradigm, Anne Carr speaks of both negative moments of protest and critique as well as positive moments of historical revisioning and theological construction (in *Paradigm Change In Theology*, pp.397-407). In a similar voice, Rosemary Reuther constructs a feminist theology of liberation that not only exposes the patriarchal dimension which tacitly underlies the Christian tradition and shapes much of modern thought, but also engages in a retrieval of the feminist dimension of those same traditions, recognizing that it is both, “self-deluding and unsatisfying” to think one can reject the authority of tradition *per se*. The meaning of the post-critical paradigm rings clear in her admonition that “one cannot wield the lever of criticism without a place to stand.” (*Sexism and God Talk*, p. 18)

In these brief remarks on contemporary political and liberation theology, I have tried to suggest where I see the significance for Catholic thought in Polanyi’s tacit victory and unfinished agenda. Post-critical philosophy has led

to a fundamental rethinking of the modern relationships between science and ideology, theory and praxis, myth and reflection, authority and freedom, value commitments and truth claims. In contributing to the development of a new paradigm for theology, Polanyi has helped point the way towards a meaningful, i.e., dialectical confrontation between Catholicism and modernity.

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