

Polanyi and the Sadness of Unbelief

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Christianity, faith, doubt, the Moot, meaning, Paul Tillich, miracles, worship, nihilism, myth.

Among other important things, William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski's biography of Michael Polanyi raises questions concerning the scientist-philosopher's religious convictions. Despite his profound respect for Christianity, he suffered from an inability to believe.

Readers of *Tradition and Discovery* need no reminder that Michael Polanyi's work has attracted the attention of theologians and Christians in general. They cannot, therefore, have been surprised to learn that Fr. Martin X. Moleski, member of the Society of Jesus and Professor of Religious Studies at Canisius College, had accepted responsibility for rounding the late Professor William T. Scott's invaluable but rather lengthy and unfinished manuscript into publishable form. The silent collaboration between the two men proved to be fruitful, for Professor Scott, who taught physics at the University of Nevada, Reno, was at his best when writing about Polanyi's scientific achievements. His ability to grasp those achievements and make them comprehensible to laymen made it possible for Fr. Moleski to focus his attention on Polanyi's philosophy, not least as it bears upon the Christian faith.

Like other Christians stirred by some of the implications of Polanyi's work, Fr. Moleski wondered about the philosopher's own beliefs and discovered that they were difficult to pin down. Insofar, he tells us, as religious faith is a form of ultimate concern, "Polanyi was a person of profound religious faith" (p. 287). That may be so, but expressing "ultimate concern" is a far cry from affirming the Nicene Creed—and Polanyi knew it. Fr. Moleski recalls the story of the latter's sorrowful reaction to a question put to him by a kindly priest: "Can you say, Michael, 'I know whom I have believed?'" "If only I could," Polanyi replied (p. 287).

Polanyi was born in Budapest to a family of assimilated Jews. Neither parent seems to have had religious faith of any kind. "Did your father believe in God?" his friend, the sociologist Edward Shils, once asked him. "I don't know," Polanyi replied. "I never asked him."¹ In his youth, we know from an uncharacteristically self-revealing letter to his countryman Karl Mannheim, he was a materialist and disciple of H.G. Wells. As it has for so many, however, a reading of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* changed his mind and heart—in some sense, forever. Yet by 1919, the year in which he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, he had already begun to entertain doubts, if not about the existence of God then surely about the divinity of Christ. In 1921 he married Magda Kemeny, a Catholic, in a civil ceremony.

During his years in Weimar Germany, where he was building an enviable reputation as a physical chemist and beginning a family, Polanyi does not seem to have given Christianity much thought, although as a strong proponent of Jewish assimilation he identified with Christian culture in the broad sense. His wartime association with the Moot, a discussion group organized by the theologian J.H. Oldham and concerned above all with exploring Christian approaches to the problems of modern society, reawakened his interest in religious questions. Most Moot members—T.S. Eliot among them—were Christians of one sort or another, although

Mannheim, who played a pivotal role in the deliberations, made no profession of faith. Polanyi certainly took the work of the Moot seriously, but in a 1948 letter to Oldham he confessed that “our meeting leaves me increasingly with a feeling that I have no right to describe myself as a Christian” (p. 212).

Polanyi never seemed to change his mind about that, but not out of stubborn pride. “A religious belief,” he wrote in *Meaning* (Professor Harry Prosch, his co-author, would not have put these words in his mouth), “cannot be achieved by our deliberate efforts and choice. It is a gift of God and may remain inexplicably denied to some of us.”² These were words of regret, not resistance. And they did not mean that Polanyi had concluded that he had nothing of importance to say about religious faith. The argument that he developed in his Gifford Lectures and later in *Personal Knowledge* hinged on his conviction that faith—the holding of unproven and possibly mistaken beliefs—was necessary to any productive search for truth.

Unlike Descartes, Polanyi believed that to begin with absolute doubt, was to end with it. That did not mean, of course, that religious doubt had to be concealed or completely resolved. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi quoted Paul Tillich, the decidedly heterodox theologian whom he much admired, with approval: “Faith embraces itself and the doubt about itself.”³ Polanyi expressed many doubts concerning orthodox Christianity, particularly with respect to a world beyond this one and to events believed to be miraculous. Christians made a serious mistake, he sagely observed, when they attempted to substantiate the latter by pointing to possible natural explanations; to explain miracles in that way was to explain them away. He himself did not believe that non-natural events occur. Moreover, like Tillich, he refused to assert that God exists—rather the contrary. “He exists,” he insisted, “in the sense that He is to be worshipped and obeyed, but not otherwise.”⁴

As Fr. Moleski says, “For Polanyi, the proper Christian inquiry is worship” (p. 288). Polanyi would therefore have been prepared to answer the question posed by Michael Gelven in his thoughtful philosophical inquiry, *Spirit and Existence*: “Do we worship because we believe that there is a God, or do we wonder about God because we are beings who worship?”⁵ For Polanyi, as for Gelven, worship was a way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger), an indwelling (Polanyi) that gives meaning (lower, not upper, case) to life. It was certainly not by chance that Polanyi entitled his last book *Meaning*. Better than most, he recognized that the specter of nihilism haunted the modern world and he dedicated himself to restoring the belief that life is meaningful, that there is a purpose to our existence. “Men need a purpose which bears on eternity,” he wrote in *The Tacit Dimension*.⁶

And so they do. But they cannot simply live *as if* life were meaningful. In the chapter “The Structure of Myth” in *Meaning*, Polanyi wrote that for Mircea Eliade, the distinguished student of religion, “the prime value of archaic myth lies in showing the world to be full of great meaning.”⁷ That is true, but ancient peoples did not think of their beliefs as “myths”; they believed them to be true. On Polanyi’s view, the factual existence or non-existence of God is beside the point; in the act of worship God exists *for us*.

It is one thing, however, to say, as Polanyi did, that any attempt to prove the existence of God by an appeal to reason must fail, and quite another to suggest that the question is irrelevant. Spiritual pilgrims cannot be content with the assurance that Christianity, understood as a set of profound myths, is existentially meaningful; they want to know whether or not it witnesses to the truth, or rather The Truth. They cannot, as Polanyi could, express wonder at the power and meaning of the Lord’s Prayer but then add “though literally I believe none of [it]” (p. 273).

Richard Allen, who knows Polanyi's work well—and admires it—is right when he observes that the Hungarian thought of Christian belief only with respect to this world. To be sure he posited transcendent ideals such as Truth and Justice, but for him they were projections, idealizations of historical and human contrivances. Allen is right too that while natural and historical facts cannot verify the Christian Faith, “the refutation of those facts of which Christian theology articulates the supernatural meaning, would undermine Christian belief.”⁸

But if orthodox Christians must find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept Polanyi's religious views, they nevertheless owe him a debt of gratitude for recognizing the often nihilistic consequences of unbelief and striving to make belief possible for men and women living in a post-Christian world. If nothing else, he showed that every view of life and the world—not only the Christian—is finally dependent upon an ultimate commitment. If, pushed to the utmost limit, we are forced to state reasons for our truth claims, we will all be obliged to say: “Because I believe it to be true.” And that is so even for the nihilist.

There were many things that Polanyi believed to be true, but the dogmas of historic Christianity were not among them. As this excellent biography testifies, he was saddened by that unbelief. In the book's epilogue, Professor Scott quotes from the moving obituary that *The Times* (London) published on February 23, 1976, the day after Polanyi died: “Those who knew Polanyi well will attest...to a pervading sadness which was none the less at every other moment illuminated by sparkling humour....”⁹

Endnotes

¹ My conversation with Professor Shils; Chicago, 1991.

² Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 180.

³ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 280.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁵ Michael Gelven, *Spirit and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Meaning of Spiritual Existence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 84.

⁶ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 92.

⁷ Polanyi, *Meaning*, pp. 127-28.

⁸ Richard Allen, *Thinkers of Our Time: Polanyi* (London: The Claridge Press, 1990), pp. 75-76.

⁹ “Professor Michael Polanyi, Eminent scientist and philosopher,” *The Times* (London), February 23, 1976, p. 14.