Accepting Imperfection: The Social Creed of a Christian Capitalist

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ABSTRACT

"Forms of Atheism" is, despite its title, a plea for modest expectations in the economic and social sphere. Polanyi identifies five kinds of false "gods" who have led our culture astray. Although he criticizes an ideal of progress inspired by the Christian tradition, he affirms the importance of love and praises "the British sense of national brotherhood" as a force for good that derives from "obeying the will of God." What Polanyi means by "God" is left to the reader's sympathetic intuition into Polanyi's character.

The "main point" Polanyi wanted to make in "Forms of Atheism" was "to urge a radical break with belief in Progress" (§4).[1] If he defends theism, it is a theism without a theology. What Polanyi offers in place of five failed gods–the "God of the Bible" (§1), Reason, History, Individuality, and Political Reform–is a non-dogmatic and practical form of Christianity. Speaking as a cultural Christian, Polanyi recommends that we repent of the "chief vice" of our age, "moral perfectionism" (§3), and instead accept the unavoidable imperfections of a market economy.

Polanyi expresses "horror" at the prospect of accepting "any theological authority based on revelation" (§1). He agrees with the rationalists that this form of religion produces "religious wars," "clerical obscurantism," and "religious fanaticism," and consequently denies that "religion '*is* the blessed sacrament' or that the decisive fact of Christianity is that 'the tomb was empty'" (§1). For him, the "central mysteries" are "Creation and Incarnation," but " the texts on which we rely for our knowledge of them can give only one aspect of the truth and may well be compatible with other apparently contradictory reports" (§2). Polanyi suggests that specific theological or dogmatic assertions have "the secondary status of crude statements" and ought to be held only provisionally in view of any reader's fallibility (§2). The one positive aspect of the Christian tradition that survives the rationalist critique is compassion for others: "the vision of salvation had opened men's eyes and they could no longer achieve that indifference to human suffering at the price of which the mind of antiquity (from Socrates to Marcus Aurelius) secured its serenity" (§3). What keeps Polanyi from fully embracing Athenic (rationalist) atheism is the fact that "Christian love" endures as an "intolerable shirt of flame, which human power cannot remove" (§5).[2]

The problem for Polanyi is that the Christian "vision of salvation" (§3) gave rise to "the opiate of progress" (§5), which fueled the "revolutionary historicism" of Marx and "transform[ed] into hatred the hopes of Christianity" (§4). In place of the absolute perfection of society predicted by Marx and demanded by Marxists, Polanyi offers a more modest "scope of social improvement" that can never eliminate "economic wastage, competitive struggle, inequality, and oppression" (§5). These are concomitants of the economic realities that "the allocation of resources to a modern industrial system can be conducted only through a market" and that "wages must be adequately graded and enterprises must be required to make profits" (§5). Polanyi's practical spirituality recommends that we renounce perfectionism in social theory: "Henceforth we shall have to face once more the fact that the condition of man is miserable and that social institutions are full of obvious defects which cannot be eliminated. We shall try to reduce particular defects, but shall know that it will make on the whole only a small difference if we succeed" (§5).

Polanyi concedes that the articles of his creed are not much different from those "that find expression in rationalist atheism of the kind I have put down to Athene" (§2). An atheist could accept that there are limitations to the scope of reason, that the forces of history are not absolute, that the individual may rightly be required to yield to the just demands of society, and that we are best served by a realistic outlook on what might be hoped for from "regulative economic legislation," which Polanyi portrays as "an essential condition for the rational operation of capitalism" (§5). Atheists undoubtedly would take issue with the thought that there is any Christian monopoly on compassion for human suffering. To paraphrase Tina Turner, they might well ask, "What's God got to do with it?"

Polanyi invokes God several times in these notes. He believes that there is divine sanction for the acts of faith that he makes with universal intent: "I am ready to claim universal validity for my beliefs, even though I recognize that such commitment inevitably transcends evidence. I take this jump, trusting that God demands it of me and hoping that I may succeed for reasons that pass my limited understanding" (§2). He speaks of a "transcendent origin of my beliefs" (§2) and identifies himself with people of prayer: "I believe that when we pray 'Thy will be done' we should offer to surrender to the will of God all our specific beliefs, excepting only what is logically implied in this act of surrender" (§2). Although he has no principle by which to distinguish British nationalism from Nazism, Zionism, or love of "the Great Socialist Fatherland," he nevertheless believes that "the British sense of national brotherhood is among the most potent forces of salvation today" and that "in cultivating that brotherhood British people are obeying the will of God" (§3).

Precisely because Polanyi rejects two traditional foundations for theology–the natural theology derived from contemplating the existence of God and positive theology derived from the Word of God–it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down what the word "God" meant to him when he wrote this note. Polanyi's God does not speak definitively to believers. Believers may speak to God, but not about God. Nevertheless, Polanyi trusts that God will reward acts of faith and does discriminate between those whose national spirit is praiseworthy and those whose national spirit is corrupt. Polanyi clearly holds that the worship of false gods poisons society; by implication, perhaps, he suggests that we need a true God to save us from absolutizing our ideals.

Polanyi might best be thought of as a non-denominational Christian before non-denominationalism became popular. He could also be understood as a person who, to use a phrase popular in our own day, was "spiritual but not religious." "God" clearly functioned for him as the highest possible regulative ideal, toward which all of our intentions strive and by which all of our hopes are realized. We cannot say much more than that, for Polanyi did not leave us a record of his prayer to God as he understood God. What Polanyi thought when he prayed–if he thought when he prayed, if he prayed–is a secret that he has not disclosed to us.

ENDNOTES

[1]All references are to the five sections of the article.

[2]The image is from T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," IV: "Love is the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove. / We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire or fire."