WHAT TO BELIEVE[1]

Michael Polanyi

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ABSTRACT

"What to Believe" is a brief, hitherto unpublished talk that Michael Polanyi gave at a spring 1947 conference of the Student Christian Movement in Manchester, UK. Polanyi criticizes the way in which modern skepticism undercuts Christianity and what he calls "civic morality" and also promotes a misleading account of modern science. Polanyi outlines and compares the ways in which believing and belonging underlie understanding in science, Christianity and "civic morality."

[**Editor's Note:** Neither the Key Words nor the Abstract were part of the typescript of Polanyi's original talk. We have preserved Polanyi's spelling, capitalization and punctuation. There are two typed copies of "What to Believe" and a one-page outline in Box 31, Folder 10 of the Michael Polanyi Papers at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. One of the two typescripts was almost certainly the final redacted version used in Polanyi's oral presentation and the text below follows this typescript. It has some penciled and typed in additions and corrections above lines and words and these are included. He added a few penciled symbols indicating that some sentences should begin a new paragraph; this text follows these symbols. There are also marks, similar to those found in other archival copies of orally-delivered material, intended to note places for

pauses or emphasis and some penciled underlinings, also likely to mark words to emphasize, but these are not noted here, although the few places where Polanyi added typed underlinings are included. The typescript has ellipses between some paragraphs and we have included these since Polanyi seems to have used these to mark off different sections of his discussion. There is one full sentence and one four-sentence paragraph that are crossed out. Perhaps Polanyi saw these elements were redundant or he decided they did not clearly say what he meant; we have, nevertheless, included these crossed out elements but they are footnoted.]

Our subject is Christianity and the Modem Mind. We shall try to probe our own state of mind, as it emerges from modern education, from our reading of books, periodicals and newspapers, from our listening to the talks over the wireless, and from partaking in conversation with people every day.

We shall ask ourselves what response we can give in this state of mind to the teachings of the Christian religion, to which I presume we all attach some degree of faith.

Immediately we are faced with the question: What are we to believe? Can we square it with our intellectual conscience if we believe anything that goes beyond the evidence of our senses? Is there any justification for such apparently reckless conduct of our minds?

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Let us ponder this question by taking a careful look at some of the beliefs which are most commonly accepted among modern men. Let us see the grounds on which they rest.

It is a common belief that all men must die. We speak of natural death or of violent death; but in any case death is thought to be the result of a bodily injury, be it due to disease or to a bullet penetrating our skull.

Such a belief seems incontestable to us: yet it is not shared by vast numbers of primitive people who are believers in magic. If a fellow tribesman is devoured by a crocodile such people will immediately look for the evil influence behind the crocodile. They will not be satisfied unless they can pin the responsibility on some personal enemy of the victim, some malicious magician, on whose behalf the crocodile may have acted. From time immemorial their minds have been turning towards such explanations of violent death and indeed of all kind [sic] of death. They apply the same interpretation to the event of illness, to the spread of disease among cattle, to the failure of crops, and to the many other vicissitudes which afflict them. Sometimes they may find it difficult to trace the supposed evil influence back to its imaginary source, but on the whole the evidence as they see it has left no doubt in their minds that their

method of interpreting the accidents of life is fundamentally sound. So they believe in magic; and they believe in it with the same implicit assurance with which we modem Europeans deny its existence.

For to us a belief in magic appears utterly foolish. The African natives may produce the most reliable witnesses testifying that they had actually observed a magician hostile to the crocodile's victim in the very act of casting on him the fatal spell—the magician may even confess to this action in open court—yet we would refuse even to consider the evidence. Nothing could induce us to believe in magic. We are impervious to arguments in its support as its believers are to arguments against it.

To the natives of course our own naturalistic explanations may well appear both shallow and arbitrary. To assume that a man's life comes to an end between a crocodile's jaws for no better reasons than the crocodile's appetite may seem to them to make nonsense of human fate. It also fails to explain why dozens of crocodiles will leave a man unharmed and then suddenly one of them will attack and devour him. Nothing can convince primitive man that ours is a satisfactory way of interpreting such events.

The divergence between the two mentalities arises entirely from different ways of upbringing. The children of natives educated in European schools readily accept the modern outlook and there is little doubt that our own children, if brought up as members of primitive tribes, would fully believe in magic, just as their fellow tribesmen believed in it.

This leaves us in an uneasy position. We are reluctant to accept that our reliance on natural causation is based on a belief which we hold for no better reason than that of having been brought up to it.

Yet there it is. And I can see only one way of dealing with the situation; namely to regard ourselves as favoured by fortune by being born to an enlightened community which knows the truth of natural causation and which by the education which it has given us in our early childhood has imparted to us these true beliefs and protected us from accepting the errors of foolish superstitions.

I for one at any rate am prepared to accept this as true, and I would expect that most modern men would accept it also, if they were called upon to explain their position in this matter. Yet it is clear that such a statement does little more than reaffirm the beliefs to which we were brought up. It is like a person testifying to his own honesty: which leaves us inclined to look round for some more independent testimony.

Is there—we ask again—no knowledge which is based merely on the evidence of our senses and can be held on these grounds alone, without any need to accept any particular beliefs?

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On such a question all eyes of course turn to science. Surely science has proved rigorously by experience that there can be no magic?

Now has it? Of course it has not. It has assumed that magic does not exist and has achieved great success in explaining the world and in developing the technical powers of man without recourse to magic. By doing so it has certainly convinced us that all magic is nonsense, but it still leaves the natives of central Africa unconvinced. We may also recall that there are large parts of science, fully accepted by most of those who believe in science from which considerable numbers of modern men emphatically dissent. I am thinking of scientific medicine which is altogether rejected by Christian Scientists, as well as by various other schools of healing, such as the homoeopaths, herbalists, osteopaths, etc. We may recall also that there are other modern men—again of considerable intelligence and perfect honesty—who believe in a kind of magic, namely in the predictions of astrology, quite unabashed by the opposition of science to their views.

No, science is not based on the mere evidence of our senses. What scientists will accept as true does no doubt greatly depend on observed facts: but it depends also on previously accepted assumptions about the nature of things. Science carries no conviction to people who refuse to share these assumptions. If we could bring up a whole generation of mankind in a spirit hostile to these assumptions and continue with such an education until all the people died out who were brought up to accept these assumptions, science would cease to have any appeal to men's minds and would fall entirely into oblivion. Remember the fate suffered by ancient science in the early Middle Ages in Europe. Remember that had the Nazis conquered the world, large sections of science would have disappeared. And I think that the establishment of Marxist control over the planet would lead to similar results.

Science cannot give an independent confirmation of our usual assumption of natural causes because it is itself based on the same assumption. In addition to which it presupposes some more elaborate beliefs which are properly understood only by scientists pursuing original research. All those beliefs are acquired by education. They are imparted to young people receiving an education in science by a community which holds these beliefs and transmits them by the process of teaching from one generation to the other.[2]

Science, therefore, like all other knowledge, presupposes belief, a belief rooted in the fact that the believer belongs to a group of people already holding those beliefs.

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To understand—to believe—and to belong—these three seem indissolubly connected. Understanding, believing and belonging are in fact three aspects of the same state of mind: of the mental process of knowing: they are its theoretical aspect, its confessional aspect and its social aspect. Only when we realise the perfect conjunction

of these three aspects in all forms of knowledge, can we hope to judge rightly whether to accept or reject any particular form of knowledge.

We can then appreciate that science and our usual interpretation of events by natural causes, are one type of knowledge, in which the theoretical aspect looms large, while the process of believing and the condition of belonging is taken unwittingly for granted: and that there may well be other forms of knowledge in which the balance between the three aspects is different. This will place religion beside science without impairing the standing of either of them.[3] That in particular, religious knowledge has the same three aspects as scientific knowledge, only with a different balance between them. Let us examine this idea for a moment.

There is a theoretical aspect of religion which is theology. It tries to elucidate the many difficult problems which arise from the belief that we as finite men have communion with God, the perfect and everlasting Being. It is a difficult and interesting field of enquiry, similar in many ways to mathematics—which also represents a sustained logical pursuit of a set of very abstract premises. Secondly there is the confessional aspect of religion, that is the belief in God. All theology would be meaningless of course if our belief in God were false. And finally there is the social aspect of religion in that Christian religious beliefs are commonly held by groups of people organized in Churches. The Churches transmit their beliefs from generation to generation, and the beliefs of most Christians are formed in early childhood through their upbringing as members of one or other of the Christian churches.

I have unfortunately no sufficient knowledge of religious history and religious doctrine to describe how the parts played by the different aspects of religious knowledge has varied in the course of time and in the different sections of the Christian world. But there are certain obvious disparities. It is clear that Roman Catholicism relies more on the social aspect of religion, that is, on men's belonging to the church; whereas Protestantism give greater prominence to the individual act of faith. In some periods there was a danger that the essential Christian revelation might become submerged in a flood of similarly sounding but essentially different beliefs. At the time—in the fourth century of our era—St. Augustine and others developed theology to a decisive factor for the guidance of faith. Something similar happened—it would seem to me—in this century, when the dilution of the Christian faith by 19th century liberalism was overcome by the theological movement led by Karl Barth. While these variations in the importance of the theoretical and the social aspects of religion are important, they do not affect of course the decisive position of the confessional aspect. An active faith in God has always been and ever remains the fountain of all religious knowledge.

Here lies the difference between science and religion. A young man can become a scientist merely by joining a university and practicing the methods of scientific thought and scientific enquiry; for in doing so he will unwittingly absorb the fundamental

beliefs that are common to all scientists. In religion things are different. In religion we can hold our fundamental beliefs only by positively confessing them in the form of prayer and worship. No amount of theological learning will make your faith secure and the membership of a Church will not do it for you either. We must struggle for our faith incessantly; particularly today, when religious beliefs are no longer generally held to be true, but when on the contrary in many sections of society a religious believer is looked upon rather as a freak. In such an atmosphere religious beliefs soon evaporate, unless they are constantly replenished by a conscious effort of the will.

The intellectual efforts of the young scientist, by which he acquires the scientific knowledge of nature are thus paralleled by the religious efforts of the Christian by which he achieves—or at least approaches—a knowledge of God. Both acquire certain beliefs for the sake of achieving certain knowledge. The fact that the scientist acquires his beliefs unwittingly which the Christian gains his own in open battle, is certainly important—but it yet leaves the two forms of knowledge standing, on equal footing, side by side.

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From science and religion let us turn to morality and particularly to civic morality. The successes of science in interpreting the universe have made the modern mind suspicious of religious beliefs and this problem has been with us for hundreds of years past. But the modern mind of today is subject to an even more serious crisis. To religious skepticism which degrades man's individual fate, has been added a moral skepticism which threatens the very foundations of man's communal life.

The modern psychological interpretation of man according to Freud, ascribes all his actions to other than moral motives. His impulses are said to be sheer desires, which are curbed merely by fear of punishment. When punishment is applied from early childhood, fear of it becomes second nature and makes us believe that it is wrong to do the things for which we used to be punished. The ultimate control of our actions remains, in this view, with our desires and fears.

The modern sociological interpretation of man is on parallel lines. It regards movements of history as ultimately determined by other than moral factors. It refers instead to historic necessities. In this view it would be considered unscientific to say (for example) that Hitler's action in launching the last war was evil; or to say that it was right and honourable for Britain to resist him. We should try rather to understand both Hitler's action and the defence of Britain as the result of historic necessities, arising from the prevailing economic and social circumstances—the poverty of Germany and the wealth of Britain, or the like. The difference is then not as between right and wrong but only between "having" and "not having."

A variant of this philosophy, and the most important at the present moment, is the class war theory. In its light, history is merely the life-and-death struggle of classes. As the modes of production develop, there occurs—we are told—a shift in the relative position of the classes and finally a new class comes on top by eliminating the previous ruling class. In this struggle there are no genuine moral motives, arguments can achieve nothing and only by violence can any worthwhile result be obtained.

This interpretation of man and of the history of man threatens—as I have said—the very existence of human society. For society cannot exist without a measure of mutual confidence among men, and men who believe each other to be entirely controlled by desire and fear can have no confidence in one another. Today this destruction of human society has reached the stage at which the continued existence of political freedom is directly endangered by it throughout the world.

A free society can exist only if men firmly believe in each other as essentially moral beings. Free government is guided by discussion; that is its very essence. But how can you argue with people who have no moral conscience? What is the use of appealing to their sense of justice or to their social responsibility? They can neither be expected to respond to such argument nor to believe that it means anything on our own lips. And even if the discussion we were only to make statements of facts, why should anybody believe that we are telling the truth? Unless people maintain a considerable degree of confidence in each other's respect for moral standards, there is no common ground between them and any attempt to seek remedy for grievances by appealing to public opinion is as senseless as it is impracticable.

Moreover, without moral confidence between men there can be no government by the consent of the governed. For no government would be trusted not to abuse its position and to relinquish power when consent was withdrawn. And actually, in these circumstances it would be suicidal on the part of the governors not to perpetuate their rule by violence. For they could only expect that once turned out they would be liquidated by their sucessors. Thus inevitably, once we deny that moral motives play a part in politics, we find that the only possible form of government is by force.

I repeat it: if men will believe that they are mere bundles of appetites they cannot expect to form any human society, and only if we firmly believe in the moral nature of man can we form a free society. And I affirm that this is a proper reason for firmly accepting this belief.

For the knowledge of man is, like all knowledge, threefold. It has a theoretical aspect, which is apparent when we explain history and other human affairs by its light, and it has again its confessional and social side. It requires—as does all knowledge—that we believe in certain suppositions and that we belong to a community sharing those suppositions. And—in this case it is this social aspect which principally determines which knowledge is true and which is false. It is our dedication to the free way

of life which must never allow us to doubt the moral nature of man. It matters little how successful we are in the intellectual sense in applying this belief to the analysis of history, for it remains rooted, and must remain rooted, in the face of any evidence that experience may present, in our resolve to live as free men ruled by reason and justice.

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To sum up: it would seem to be that the uneasiness of the modern mind in holding religious and moral convictions is due to a false idea of the way to know the truth. No knowledge can be based on pure experience. There can be no science and not even an ordinary explanation of outside events without the previous assumption of certain beliefs. And we cannot believe without belonging to a society of fellow believers. Therefore all knowledge has its theoretical, confessional and social aspects and relies for its truth on all three of them. While acceptance of the validity of science is based on its theoretical successes, the acceptance of religion is based primarily on the power of conscious belief. And again, thirdly, the knowledge of man must rely decisively on the will of men to form a good society—our belief in moral man is primarily expressed in our desire to belong to a society formed by men who believe likewise.

The attempt of the modern mind to judge all knowledge exclusively by theoretical criteria has first shaken religion and then has gone on to threaten the moral basis of society. Against this threat of nihilism we must appeal to a more comprehensive conception of knowledge. Power to explain is only one test and it is insufficient alone to validate any knowledge. A comprehensive threefold test of knowledge restores the position of religion and of moral certitude side by side with that of natural science.

ENDNOTES

[1]Thanks to John Polanyi, literary executor for Michael Polanyi, for granting permission to make "What to Believe" readily available (for non-commercial use) in *Tradition and Discovery* and as a part of the collection of Polanyi materials on the Polanyi Society web site.

[2]This paragraph was crossed out in both the typescript that Polanyi used for delivery and what apparently was his backup typescript with fewer redactions.

[3]This sentence was marked through in both the typescript that Polanyi used for delivery and what apparently was his backup typescript with fewer redactions.