

# Tradition & Discovery

## The Polanyi Society Periodical

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Preface.....	2
Polanyi Society Meeting.....	4
News and Notes.....	5
Keiser's Post-Critical Niebuhr: A Review Article.....	6
Charles S. McCoy	
McCoy on Keiser's Niebuhr: A Post-Critical Dialogue.....	15
R. Melvin Keiser	
Historical and Textual Notes on H. Richard Niebuhr and Michael Polanyi.....	20
Phil Mullins	
Torrance on Polanyi and Polanyi on God: Comments on Weightman's Criticisms--A Review Essay.....	32
John V. Apczynski	
Polanyi and Mathematics, Torrance and Philosophy of Science: A Response to Apczynski's Review.....	35
Colin Weightman	
Submissions for Publication.....	38
Book Review.....	39
<i>Rethinking Rights and Responsibilities: The Moral Bonds of Community</i> by Arthur J. Dyck	
Reviewed by Paul Lewis	
Notes on Contributors.....	41
Electronic Discussion Group and Membership Information.....	42

# The Polanyi Society

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## Preface

Some issues of *TAD* include primarily articles with theological interests while others include more philosophically oriented essays; some issues are neither predominantly theological nor philosophical, but are much more eclectic, with articles touching on subjects such as literary and political theory. The rich pluralism of contemporary scholarship supported by Polanyi's thought is certainly a reflection of the diversity of Polanyi's own interests. Although it sometimes causes problems in proudly disciplinary enclaves, I believe it is important to continue to represent in *TAD* the range of scholarly interests inspired by Polanyi.

This issue includes material that is primarily theological in orientation. It has a double focus. First, there are three pieces which treat the Christian theologian and moral philosopher H. Richard Niebuhr, a figure, in North American Polanyi circles, frequently linked to Polanyi. Polanyi Society member R. Melvin Keiser has written an interesting second book on Niebuhr which led me to solicit a review essay from Charles S. McCoy, also a Niebuhr student and scholar, a Polyanian, and a figure perhaps more than any other who has brought together Niebuhrian and Polyanian themes. Keiser kindly agreed to respond ("McCoy on Keiser's Niebuhr" to McCoy's review essay ("Keiser's Post-Critical Niebuhr"). My own essay ("Historical and Textual Notes on H. Richard Niebuhr and Michael Polanyi") really is just a tuned up version of a set of notes I began gathering five years ago as I tried to determine the historical connection between Polanyi and Niebuhr and to trace the references to Polanyi made in Niebuhr's writing.

The second focus is not a new topic but it has been newly discussed in Colin Weightman's recent book, *Theology in a Polyanian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance*. What Weightman does is analyze both Polanyi's and Torrance's writing about religion. Since John Apczynski was one of the original essayists in the 1982 special *Zygon* issue on Polanyi and religion and has, as well, written about Harry Prosch's interpretation of Polanyi on religion, I asked John to do a review essay on Weightman's book ("Torrance on Polanyi and Polanyi on God: Comments on Weightman's Criticisms"). Weightman kindly agreed to respond ("Polanyi and Mathematics, Torrance and Philosophy of Science") to John's incisive and insightful essay. What we have in these

*Tradition and Discovery* is indexed selectively in *The Philosopher's Index* and *Religion One: Periodicals*. Book reviews are indexed in *Index to Book Reviews in Religion*.

companion pieces is another stimulating round of the discussion going on for the past fifteen or so years about how to read Polanyi's understanding of religion and religious knowledge.

Please note that you have a subscription renewal notice inserted as a flyer in this issue. The Polanyi Society does have a few expenses and remains solvent only if members pay our modest dues. The subscription cycle always commences in the Fall. Any questions about dues should be directed to me rather than Richard Gelwick since I now have the records.

The Polanyi Society now has a World Wide Web page described below with much useful information. I hope that many people take a look at this fledgling WWW effort and provide feedback to me (mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu) about how to expand and improve the site. Clearly, it is increasingly important to provide electronic resources on Polanyi and Polyanian scholarship.

The annual Polanyi Society Fall meetings are coming up November 21 and 22, 1997, in San Francisco. For those who can get to San Francisco early, there will be a 7:00 p.m. dinner on November 21 honoring Charles S. McCoy, a figure who, like William Poteat (honored by the Polanyi Society in its 1993 meeting) has introduced generations of students to Polanyi's writings. Following the banquet, there will be a late Friday night (9 p.m.-11 p.m.) session on the thought of McCoy. The panel will include four former McCoy students. Marty Moleski has also put together a good Saturday morning session with two additional papers. See the program description (p. 4), *News and Notes* (p. 5) and the enclosed flyer for details about these meetings. Please pay careful attention to the details about banquet reservations and how to acquire pre-circulated papers (there are some changes this year).

Phil Mullins

## Polanyi Society WWW Materials

The Polanyi Society now has a home page on the World Wide Web located at the following URL: <http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi/>. Like everything else on WWW, this site is "under construction." Parts of the existing structure will be expanded and reorganized in the future. Bibliographic resources will, for example, eventually be included here. Suggestions and criticisms are invited and should be sent to Phil Mullins at the e-mail address listed at the site. The following topics are the basic framework for the home page:

- ◆◆ Polanyi Society Membership, Meetings, and Electronic Discussion List
- ◆◆ *Tradition & Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*
  - Publication Information
  - History of Polanyi Society Publications. This includes a listing of issues by date and volume. For recent issues, tables of contents are included.
  - Author Index for 1990-1997
  - Locating Early Publications
- ◆◆ Other Journals with Special Interest in the Thought of Michael Polanyi
- ◆◆ Guide To The Papers Of Michael Polanyi
- ◆◆ Photographs of Michael Polanyi

# Upcoming Polanyi Society Meeting

The Polanyi Society will have three sessions on November 21 and 22, 1997 at its meeting held in conjunction with this year's American Academy of Religion/Society for Biblical Literature annual meeting. The two regular sessions will be in the San Francisco Hilton (333 O'Farrell St.). A special banquet honoring Charles S. McCoy will precede the first regular session and will be held in the Edward Hopper Room of the nearby Maxwell Hotel (386 Geary St.).

As in past years, papers in regular sessions will not be read; presentations will be limited, with the focus on discussion. Papers for Sessions II and III will be available for review no later than early November. You may have papers mailed to you for a nominal charge (\$7). Several of those who regularly attend Polanyi Society meetings rely upon the coordinator to mail papers without a request; this practice has, however, become a messy one and will be discontinued. Contact Marty Moleski for copies of papers: moleski@canisisu.edu, fax 716-886-6506, telephone: (716) 888-2383, U.S. Mail: 2001 Main Street, Buffalo, New York, 14208. **Papers will be posted on the Polanyi Society WWW site (<http://www.mwsc.edu/~polanyi>); they can be printed directly from the site at no cost.** They should be available there by early November, if not before.

*Session I*--Friday, November 21, 1997 7:00-8:15 p.m. Edward Hopper Room, Maxwell Hotel (386 Geary St.)

***Banquet Honoring Charles S. McCoy***

**Richard Gelwick:** Master of Ceremonies

(See further information on page 5 and inserted reservation flyer)

*Session II*--Friday, November 21, 1997, 9:00-11:00 p.m. in Continental 1, SF Hilton (333 O'Farrell St)

***Special Topic: Charles S. McCoy's Post Critical Theology***

Panelists: **Phil Mullins, Richard Gelwick, Phil Rolnick, Doug Adams**

Respondent: **Charles S. McCoy**

*Session III*--Saturday, November 22, 1997, 9:00-11:30 a.m. in Union Square 11, SF Hilton

**Lous H. Swartz, "Implicit Knowledge (Tacit Knowing), Connoisseurship, and the Common Law Tradition"**

Respondent: **Ira Peak**

**Andy F. Sanders, "Dogmatism, Fallibilism and Truth"**

Respondent: **Dale Cannon**

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## NEWS AND NOTES

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### Banquet Honoring Charles S. McCoy

For over thirty years, Charles S. McCoy introduced generations of students to the thought of Michael Polanyi at Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. McCoy's own writing in Christian theology and ethics incorporates and develops some major Polanyian themes. The 1997 Polanyi Society meeting honors McCoy with both a banquet and a session featuring a panel of former students discussing his work (see the description of Session II on page 4). Members of the Polanyi Society, their guests and others who know McCoy are invited to attend the banquet at 7:00 p.m. on Friday, November 21, 1997 in the Edward Hopper Room of the Maxwell Hotel (386 Geary St.) which is about a block from the AAR/SBL host hotel, the San Francisco Hilton. If you can come, bring a story about Charles McCoy.

Reservations with accompanying payment must be sent to Phil Mullins by November 5, 1997. Dinners, inclusive of tax and gratuity are \$30. Beverages will be available at the bar. **Menu choices and instructions for check or credit payment are enclosed on a flyer.**

Hotel reservations for anyone attending the Polanyi Society banquet honoring Charles S. McCoy (and other AAR/SBL meetings) are available at the Maxwell Hotel (386 Geary). The Maxwell is a recently renovated, smaller hotel near other AAR/SBL hotels in the Union Square area. The rate for a room with two beds is \$99.00/night (an additional roll-a-way is \$10.00/night). This is the special AAR/SBL rate. If you want to stay at the Maxwell, reserve directly with them (rather than through the AAR housing procedure); advise the hotel that your stay is in conjunction with the Polanyi Society banquet. For reservations, call toll free 888-734-6299.

There will be a weekend conference, sponsored by *Appraisal*, titled "Michael Polanyi Today" on April 17th and 18th of 1998 at Hallam Hall, University of Sheffield, UK. Bed and breakfast accommodations are available. *Pro rata* terms are available for those who cannot attend every session and for non-residents. Papers, which do not have to be narrowly focused on Polanyi, are invited. Forward proposals and inquiries to Richard Allen, Editor, *Appraisal*, 20 Ulverscroft Rd., Loughborough, Leich. LE11 3PU, England or write Allen at his e-mail address (Richard\_Allen\_21@compuserve.com).

**Elizabeth Newman** recently published "Theology and Science Without Dualism" in the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences *Bulletin* (17:1 (Winter 1997): 15-23); her essay makes use of Polanyi and Poteat and grew out of a paper presented to the "Theology and Science Group" at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the AAR/SBL.

**David Rutledge** received an award for a course titled "Nature in Scientific and Religious Perspective" that he developed for Furman and submitted to the Templeton Foundation annual competition. David has participated in some recent workshops on teaching science and religion issues sponsored by the Templeton Foundation; he reports that these have been very insightful. If you would like additional information about the Templeton Foundation program, contact Rutledge at Department of Religion, Furman University, Greenville, SC 29613-1474 (fax: 803-294-3001, e-mail: rutledge\_david@furman.edu).

# Keiser's Post-Critical Niebuhr: A Review Article

Charles S. McCoy

ABSTRACT Key Words: H. Richard Niebuhr, Michael Polanyi, R. Melvin Keiser, theology and ethics  
*This review essay on R. Melvin Keiser's Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr surveys selected works about Niebuhr, examines the strengths of Keiser's post-critical treatment of Niebuhr and raises questions about Keiser's views and about Niebuhr.*

R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996. xviii + 248p., with bibliography and index.

In the Foreword to John Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), Martin Marty writes: "The legacy of Niebuhr . . . is among the richest in American theology in the twentieth century; as a matter of fact, I wonder whether since Jonathan Edwards there has been a systematic theologian of such organizing brilliance as H. Richard Niebuhr" (p. 7). In what has become a major focus of his scholarly career, Professor Keiser has gone far in showing the accuracy of Marty's remark. Keiser went to Yale Divinity School to study in what turned out to be the final two years of Niebuhr's life. He later wrote an S.T.M. thesis under Robert L. Calhoun entitled "Relationality in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: A Study in Niebuhr's Understanding of Man and God," 1964, and, in doctoral study at Duke under William L. Poteat, wrote a dissertation on "Recovering the Personal: The Logic of Religious Discourse in the Theological Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr," 1974, in which he suggests that Niebuhr is moving toward the formulation of a postcritical theology and ethics, a term linking his work to that of Michael Polanyi, the Hungarian-British physical chemist turned philosopher, whose theory of tacit knowing, according to Marjorie Grene, provides "grounds for a revolution in philosophy."

Keiser revised and published his dissertation as *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), an exploration of Niebuhr's theological method. Now, in this later book, he focuses on the mature formulation of Niebuhr's theological ethics, on how it developed during Niebuhr's career, and on a critical appraisal of what Niebuhr accomplished and left undone at his death. These two books on Niebuhr constitute the most comprehensive treatment to date of the thought of one who is perhaps the twentieth century's greatest scholar in theology and ethics.

The strength of Keiser's treatment of Niebuhr lies (1) in the scope and detail of his approach, drawing on Niebuhr's published and unpublished writing, on his own personal contact with Niebuhr as a student at Yale, and on the views of other scholars; (2) in his perspective on the development of Niebuhr's thought, especially what Keiser calls the "conversion" that shapes the character of his mature work; (3) in his delineation of the movement toward a post-critical method that has similarities to Michael Polanyi's ground-breaking philosophy; and (4) in Keiser's evaluation of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, dealing with its depth and power as well as its deficiencies.

To appreciate Keiser's accomplishment, I shall first provide a brief overview of published works on Niebuhr. Second, there will be a closer examination of the strengths of Keiser's treatment of Niebuhr. And third, I shall raise some questions of my own about Keiser and Niebuhr.

## Survey of Selected Published Work about Niebuhr

The first substantial commentary on Niebuhr's thought appeared in *Faith and Ethics: the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper, 1957), a *festschrift* with articles by some of Niebuhr's former students. Two chapters by Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background" and "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," make up over 40% of the text of the book and provide information on the sources and shape of Niebuhr's thought. Frei is very helpful on the German background and makes good use of these sources to clarify issues in Niebuhr's theology, but he fails to give adequate attention to Niebuhr's American sources, in particular to his acknowledged debts to Jonathan Edwards and to William James and Josiah Royce from the pragmatic tradition. As a result, the first chapter seems more an essay on 19th and 20th century German theology than on Niebuhr. In the second chapter, Frei suggests some questionable interpretations of Niebuhr. For example, Frei speaks of "disbelievers," "half-believers," and "secular" culture, even as he recognizes that Niebuhr "refuses to acknowledge the absence of faith in any man" (p. 13). This basic point in Niebuhr turns "unbelievers" into believers and eliminates the need for the highly vague term "secular" by providing a means for understanding the varied faiths of believers other than Christian. Or again, Frei understands "internal" and "external" history in *The Meaning of Revelation* as "completely parallel to one another" and "quite different in kind" (p. 30), whereas Niebuhr sees a close similarity between histories, in which they differ by the perspective or faith that informs them, making each external to the others but having an internal history as viewed from within. Further, when Frei discusses the five-fold typology Niebuhr outlines in *Christ and Culture*, he says that "Niebuhr's own faith and theology are those of a 'conversionist'" (p. 65), whereas Niebuhr explicitly rejects opting for one as "the Christian answer," says that "the types are not wholly exclusive of one another," and reminds us that "in theology as in any other science the seeking of an inclusive theory is of great practical importance" (*Christ and Culture*, p. 231). While Frei provides helpful insights, especially about Niebuhr and German theology, his treatment is not an adequate guide to Niebuhr's thought.

James Gustafson's article in *Faith and Ethics*, "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," offers a helpful rendition of major motifs in Niebuhr's ethics and "an interpretation of Christian social ethics" consistent with Niebuhr's thought. In his final section, "Some Remaining Questions," however, Gustafson drifts into dubious territory in speaking of ethics and predictability, in saying that in "comparison with Catholicism, Protestantism has little culture of its own," and when he departs from Niebuhr on "the relation of ethics to ontology" (pp. 136-139).

Paul Ramsey in "The Transformation of Ethics" makes the interesting suggestion that relational objectivism may be a better way to describe Niebuhr's treatment of values than relativism.

In "Value and Valuation," George Shrader delineates a distinguishing mark of Niebuhr's thought as "the way he combines rigorous philosophical analysis with penetrating theological insight" (p. 173) and points to an apparent problem in Niebuhr's value theory, which Niebuhr later clarifies (see *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, pp. 100-113).

The articles, taken as a whole, with the exception of that by Julian Hartt, offer a helpful but by no means comprehensive or completely reliable introduction to Niebuhr's thought. Hartt's article admittedly expresses his own point of view rather than Niebuhr's, misrepresents Niebuhr at points, and is open to the devastating criticisms Niebuhr, and Polanyi, make of Hartt's type of overly- confident rationalism.

Two books on Niebuhr appeared in 1970: an introduction to his thought by John D. Godsey, referred to above, and the first comprehensive study of Niebuhr's theology, by Dutch theologian Libertus A. Hoedemaker (*The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970).

Godsey provides a good account of Niebuhr's theology and ethics, drawn from his major books and selected articles. Though he blurs some of Niebuhr's finer distinctions (e.g. internal and external history), he correctly perceives that Niebuhr is "forging something new in the world of Christian theology" and thus opens himself to criticism (pp. 96ff. and p. 108).

Hoedemaker focuses on Niebuhr's theology, showing its American **and** European (including non-German) sources. His treatment, done with empathy but not uncritically, covers an impressive array of topics in Niebuhr's thought, and raises important questions about its possible limitations. Hoedemaker does not deal adequately with Niebuhr's ethics, does not seem to understand the importance of Niebuhr's identification of God with the principle of being, and implies that Niebuhr's theology makes the most sense if linked to "God's final disappearance" (pp. 165-166).

James W. Fowler's *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) emerged from a doctoral dissertation at Harvard and proposes "to study in depth the development of" Niebuhr's thought. Fowler had the great advantage of access to the unpublished manuscripts left by Niebuhr at the time of his death in 1962. The biographical introduction is helpful but errs in saying, "From 1917 to 1918 Niebuhr earned a master's degree in history at Washington University;" the master's thesis itself reports "A.M., 1917, Department of Germanics." The strength of Fowler's treatment lies in his use of unpublished as well as published writings in tracing the development of Niebuhr's thought, in emphasizing the inseparability of his theology and ethics, and suggesting that Niebuhr develops an alternative to Barth and liberalism. Perhaps suffering from never having studied with Niebuhr and seeing him wrestle as he attempted to find "*logos in mythos*" Fowler overly systematizes Niebuhr, who can be called "systematic" only in a sense that is carefully qualified, and comes close to misrepresenting Niebuhr by suggesting affinities with Whitehead's metaphysics. Yet he does find in Niebuhr "a tacit covenantal structure that makes human community and human selfhood possible," a structure that is *triadic* in form (pp. 206-207), thus underscoring Niebuhr's view that humans are involved in a developing experience with their companions in the presence of divine mystery, not a clearly defined situation for rational exposition.

Donald E. Fadner, in *The Responsible God: The Christian Philosophy of H. Richard Niebuhr* (1974), fears the sovereignty of God in Niebuhr endangers human responsibility and holds that the way to correct this problem is through process metaphysics.

Lonnie D. Kliever in *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco: Word, 1977) deals with Niebuhr as reformer, theologian, and ethicist, provides a balanced treatment, and points to Niebuhr's ambiguities and relevance. Though Kliever repeats the minor error that Niebuhr's master's degree at Washington University was in history (p. 20), gives excessive priority to the conversionist position from *Christ and Culture* (pp. 58ff.), and seems to think that the ethics of responsibility eliminates teleology and deontology as principles of Christian action (pp. 113 ff.), Kliever offers a more carefully nuanced view of internal and external history and their relation to Kant (pp. 74 ff.) than is usually found (e.g. Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*. New York: Macmillan, 1966, pp. 234ff.). Kliever also notes the importance of Niebuhr for narrative theology and environmental theology, and sees his "original and powerful re-symbolization of the Christian faith" as a "resource for the ongoing reformation of the church and world" (p. 189).

Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), intends to show that "the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr adequately resolves the problem of faith seeking understanding in a manner that is at once true to the historically distinctive features of the biblical witness and accessible to its hearers" (p. 2). Though specialized in focus, Ottati carries out his purpose well and in the process indicates how Niebuhr's thought is indeed systematic.

In Jerry Irish's *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), can be found probably the best short account of the basic themes in Niebuhr. Drawing on the published writings Irish gives an orderly understanding of this dispersed system without over-organizing it and threads his way through Niebuhr's subtleties with precision and sensitivity.

*The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, edited by Ronald Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), fails to live up to its promise or do justice to its subject. With a few notable exceptions (see especially the contributions of James Gustafson and Linell Cady), the contributors do little to illumine Niebuhr's legacy nor do all of them show close acquaintance with his thought.

Among the unpublished dissertations on Niebuhr, those by Beverly Wildung Harrison (*H. Richard Niebuhr: Towards a Christian Moral Philosophy*. Union Theological Seminary, 1974) and Michael W. Maeder (*H. Richard Niebuhr's Doctrine of God and Critical Realism: An Attempt to Reconcile Orthodox Christianity with an Experiential View of God*. Graduate Theology Union, 1976) especially merit attention. Maeder provides an extensive and useful bibliography.

Given the unevenness of the published materials, Keiser's work stands out as a helpful addition to the growing literature on Niebuhr. Without neglecting its problems, Keiser succeeds in getting inside Niebuhr's complex thought and showing the intent and scope of his work. In so doing, he opens the way for Niebuhr to evoke continuing creative response without producing imitators.

### **The Strength of Keiser's Treatment of Niebuhr**

a) Scope and Detail. The most impressive aspect of Keiser's book is his meticulous inclusiveness of Niebuhr's published and unpublished work. Though he does not deal directly with the background of Niebuhr's thought, he is aware of his sources and often indicates them, and the entire range of Niebuhr's writing has been consulted and drawn on extensively to illustrate and support the view of Niebuhr that he presents. We see Niebuhr systematizing but never becoming rigidly systematic, responding to specific occasions (e.g. the articles on war) but always seeking a larger view that makes sense of the tragedies and apparent contradictions of human experience, and in the process dealing with the entire spectrum of elements in ethics and theology, though never arriving at a finished formulation. In addition, Keiser uses student notes of lectures in Niebuhr's course on Christian ethics, and of special importance, relies on his own experience of Niebuhr in class, which adds conviction to the view that "first-person grammar" is dominant in Niebuhr's mature work (pp. 48-49). Keiser draws on the work of scholars who have written about Niebuhr, using them to raise questions about possible strengths and weaknesses in Niebuhr; but he does not hesitate to disagree with them when he thinks it appropriate (see his affirmation that Niebuhr's ethics is more relational than dispositional, pp. 96-97). Part One traces the emergence of relational realism and pinpoints the time of Niebuhr's "conversion." Part Two describes the relational ethics of responsibility, involving a postcritical ethics of being and a phenomenology of the moral act. Part Three focuses on

Christian responsibility as action with Jesus Christ as the symbolic form, borne within the Christian community, that liberates and provides principles for “theo-social analysis.” Keiser concludes with a section on “A Relational Ethics of Liberating Spirituality.”

Keiser adds depth and charm to his presentation of Niebuhr’s thought with illustrations drawn from the lectures on Christian ethics in 1961 that both Keiser and his wife attended and recorded in their written notes. Here is an example:

We undergo stages in coming to emotional knowledge of the Creator amidst creaturely goodness. The stages, Niebuhr remarks, are like coming to appreciate modern art. “Our first reaction to the modern artist is: he is out of his mind.” “We look at the late Picasso’s multi-profiled woman and first wonder about his sanity. It doesn’t conform to ‘good art’,” such as that of Rembrandt or Praxiteles. “After this stage of rejection, then I resist my own interpretation of good and evil and believe that Picasso knew what he was doing.” So also, “I don’t know what God was doing when he made me but I accept it” (CE[RMK], CE[EBK]), & CE[RMK] April 26, 1961). From rejection to acceptance we can pass on to affirmation, understanding, and wonder (p. 108).

b) Perspective. The crux of Keiser’s understanding of the development of Niebuhr’s thought lies in his “conversion.” This perspective constitutes a distinctive aspect of the book, and may also be its most controversial point. “Although H. Richard Niebuhr is understood to be an outstanding representative of liberal theology turned neo-orthodox,” Keiser writes, “in fact, his conversion from liberalism was to relational thinking that bears the seeds of a postcritical theology” (p. xi). Central to Niebuhr’s thought after his conversion is the sovereignty of God, a view he shares with other neo-orthodox theologians of his time. What sets Niebuhr apart for Keiser is that he reconceives God and self in relational and experiential terms. “It means the presence of the transcendent God as pattern of being and value in the world, and the self’s personal dependence upon and faith in the trustworthiness of being in its mysterious wholeness” (p.xiii). Keiser dates Niebuhr’s shift to relational realism with precision; he believes it took place in November, 1929. Still Dean at Eden Theological Seminary, having just published his *Social Sources of Denominationalism* and an article, “From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God,” which show no sign of the new perspective, he delivers an address in late November with the title “Moral Relativism and the Christian Faith,” in which, writes Keiser, his “converted” viewpoint appears. So “it would appear that November is the time of his transformation” (p. 213, fn. 21; see also pp. 23ff.).

c) Niebuhr’s Postcritical Theology. Keiser depicts Niebuhr as breaking out of the dualisms that characterize both liberal and neo-orthodox theology, dualisms appropriated from critical philosophy. The relational realism that emerges from Niebuhr’s conversion moves him, Keiser writes, toward a postcritical perspective, so that “in his culminating ethics of responsibility, relational thinking breaks free of its dualistic container and expands into a comprehensive postcritical theology” (pp. xi-xii). By means of his postcritical approach, Niebuhr “is able to get beneath the distortions and divisions of modern thought to discover the spiritual principles inherent in the tacit relatedness of selves in actual living, which bears the seeds of social transformation” (p. 128). Keiser uses language and references that emphasize the postcritical direction of development in Niebuhr’s thought and suggest its relation to the postcritical philosophy of Michael Polanyi. He does not in this volume, however, spell out directly and in detail what this development and the relation to Polanyi mean.

d) Evaluation of Niebuhr. Keiser’s overall evaluation of Niebuhr’s theology and ethics is strongly positive. He does, however, raise questions and points to what he sees as inadequacies.

The crucial element in Niebuhr's development for Keiser is his conversion from liberal idealism to relational realism. His theology and ethics gather strength as the consequences of this shift unfold. Emerging within the context of Niebuhr's conviction of the relativism of human thought and action, relational realism affirms, first, the inseparability of value and being. To experience value is to experience being; to experience being is to experience value. Second, the presence of ultimate pattern within the relative is experienced through revelation that occurs in and through historical events. For Christians, the revelatory event is Jesus Christ. Third, Christians are enabled to trust and be loyal to this reality through the experience of Jesus Christ, which means to have faith in God. This faith, to the extent that it is present, permeates the whole of human life--feeling, reason, and all relations. As Niebuhr works through this viewpoint throughout his career, he moves toward overcoming the dualisms that have pervaded critical thought. In Reinhold Niebuhr's realism the dualism remains as the ideal remains ever unrealizable amid the sin of human actualities. In Barth, the dualism remains in the wholly otherness of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. In Tillich, the remnants of dualism are manifest in that only symbols point beyond the experienced world to the Unconditioned. Troeltsch bridges dualism by affirming the individual's mystical union with Absolute Spirit.

Niebuhr's ethics of responsibility, Keiser points out, takes shape within this relational realism. God is the One action present in all action. Selves are agents acting in response to one another in community, but ultimately in response to the prior and ongoing action of God. Only the language of responsibility to God and human companions through action and interaction in specific contexts is adequate ethics within Christian faith. On this basis, Niebuhr develops a phenomenology of the moral act: fittingness, response to divine immanence, the integrity of maturing inclusiveness, embracing change through self-transformation, finding freedom through the reinterpretation of our context, and meeting needs in response to the fullness of being. Without rejecting them, Niebuhr presents a third alternative to the teleological and deontological patterns that previously have dominated Western ethics, providing a way to deal tacitly with the complexity of actual human situations.

The key to the interpretation guiding Christian moral agency is Jesus Christ as symbolic form, by means of which Christians "tell each other what life and death, God and man, are like" (*The Responsible Self*, p. 154). Jesus Christ is the responsible self, fully human, yet also Son of God through whom humans are empowered to become sons of God. The virtues present in moral life and the principles of moral action inherent in these virtues are "centrally illuminated and reconstructed by the symbolic form of Jesus Christ" (p. 125).

Niebuhr's relational ethics, in Keiser's view, "can contribute significantly to liberation thought" (p. 128) by not separating justice from love and through a community of action that responds to social domination. Issues of social domination to which Niebuhr gives explicit attention are sexism, environmental exploitation, the Christian imperialism that results in anti-semitism, war and pacifism, and racism (pp. 131-155).

Keiser raises an important issue in asking why socioeconomic critique, so central in Niebuhr's earlier years, moves to the periphery in his later years. He builds on Beverly Harrison's comment that this change emerges from his mounting concern about the crisis in language and symbol. The need for a profound "resymbolization of the Christian message and the life of faith" led him to focus on the reformation of the church and of religion as the basis for a reformation of society. The context of social analysis thus becomes inclusive of nature and history as well as present culture and society and involves more complexity than can be managed by any one person (pp. 157-175).

The most pervasive inadequacy Keiser sees in Niebuhr's ethics is the failure to provide specific directives for action or what Keiser calls "Niebuhr's unconscious resistance to praxis" (p. 131). This resistance derives from Niebuhr's reluctance to judge others. Action must be shaped by what is fitting in particular situations, obedient to the agent's covenants. Keiser believes that Niebuhr, in this regard, fails to take responsibility into social praxis and "contradicts his responsibility perspective" (p. 155). Nor does Keiser find any evidence that Niebuhr would have included praxis in his ethics of responsibility even had he lived longer. This failure represents a remnant of dualism in his social ethics (pp. 196-197). Keiser also considers critiques of Niebuhr made by others, in particular criticisms from a feminist perspective. Sharon Welch (*A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) holds that the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in neo-orthodox theology entails domination, conquest, and control. Keiser agrees with Welch in regard to Barth and Tillich, but not with reference to Niebuhr. While Niebuhr does espouse a radical monotheism that dethrones all absolutes except the principle of being, God declares all things good; reverencing the radically monotheistic requires reverencing the entire creation and all relative existents. Indeed, says Keiser, Welch's call for "communicative solidarity" has much in common with Niebuhr's dialogical approach (pp. 52ff.).

In response to the critique of Linda Holler ("Is There a Thou 'Within' Nature? A Dialogue with H. Richard Niebuhr." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17.1 (Spring 1989): 81-102) that Niebuhr's residual dualism shows in his denigration of feeling, Keiser agrees with reference to Niebuhr until the 50's. Influenced by Jonathan Edwards' emphasis on the religious affections, Keiser writes, Niebuhr begins to focus on feelings, especially in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (1956) and in "Toward a Recovery of Feeling," a lecture at Vanderbilt in April, 1961 (pp. 57 ff.).

Catherine Keller, Keiser notes, sees Niebuhr's radical monotheism as recoiling into a focus on the One that demonizes the many (*From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*. Boston: Beacon, 1986, p. 181). Keiser replies that Niebuhr does not affirm **either** the One **or** the many but rather selves amid the valued many, responding to the valuing One in much the way Keller herself proposes. In response to Keller criticism that Niebuhr does not have a metaphysic, Keiser suggests that "Niebuhr starts from experience, not from any philosophical principle," which may be more appropriate for feminist perspectives (pp. 59-61).

Keiser reports on a paper by Linell Cady in which she sees one strand of Niebuhr's view of divine sovereignty as "relativizing and thus a denying of all human judgments and all human agency, which undercuts any efforts at political criticism and action" and another strand, "irreconcilable with the first, that makes room for social critique by affirming the making of relative judgments to achieve relative justice," a view she develops in ways Keiser believes are similar to Niebuhr's (p. 61).

Keiser concludes that these critiques have misjudged Niebuhr's understanding of divine sovereignty, but he agrees that they are correct in rejecting the phrase "radical monotheism" because it communicates a patriarchal, dominating view of God (p. 62).

Keiser mentions another criticism, the opposite of those cited above. "An outstanding ethicist, profoundly influenced by Niebuhr, James Gustafson affirms the importance of fittingness within a system of interdependence; yet he rejects what Niebuhr understands as the foundation of fittingness: divine immanence and its particularising intentionality." Gustafson's view would result in losing "Niebuhr's radical affirmation of dynamic particularity, a relationally lived universality, and the center of fittingness" (p. 220).

## Some Questions to Keiser

a) Is Keiser's emphasis on Niebuhr's conversion at a specific point in time misleading? It seems clear that Keiser has uncovered a decisive change in Niebuhr's thought, has shown it to be a shift to "relational realism" based on divine sovereignty, and has traced its outcome in Niebuhr's development of a postcritical perspective in theology and ethics. By his focus on November 1929 as the exact time of the change and emphatic use of the term "conversion," however, Keiser risks the same error of Christians who cram all the change of coming to faith in Jesus Christ into a single instant and ignore the aspect of conversion that is a continuous unfolding in a person's life. This error is especially important to avoid in dealing with H. Richard Niebuhr, who continues to wrestle with the implications of a crucial insight throughout his career. Additional insights emerge, each with ramifications to be explored as Niebuhr moves from one element of his thought to another. His appropriation of "belief-ful realism" from Tillich is another point of conversion or the emergence of an insight implicit in the earlier conversion, now discovered. Then there is the turn from examining the influence of social forces on the religious stream of faith in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* to exploring the force of the stream of faith itself in *The Kingdom of God in America*. These steps in overcoming the dichotomies of critical thinking were soon eclipsed by the giant steps taken in *The Meaning of Revelation*, as Niebuhr showed reason and faith inseparable, individual and community in symbiotic relation, and history as involving internal and external perspectives rather than being objective and subjective. Here also he provided a central metaphor for his ongoing task of faith seeking understanding: permanent revolution, or, put another way, that the habitation of his intellect was a tent rather than a palace. He then moves beyond the critical bifurcation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith in *Christ and Culture*, and on toward a postcritical understanding of faith, of value, of theological education, and of language. Each stage required rethinking the entire fabric of his theology and ethics, yet each would have enriched the whole he envisaged but did not have time to set down in provisional completion. Overemphasis on the early conversion obscures the crucial character of the ongoing development and continuous rethinking that characterized Niebuhr's method.

b) Does Keiser's focus on the importance of language in Niebuhr's late work tend to obscure at times the centrality of human action and interaction in response to God's action in his ethics and theology? If one reads Keiser's earlier book on Niebuhr, *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr*, the emphasis on meaning, metaphors, and the dialogical self almost eliminates the active motif in Niebuhr in favor of linguistic analysis. Niebuhr in his postcritical quest is distinguished from Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and placed in the company of Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein as postcritical philosophers. While we can understand this focus on language in a dissertation done under William H. Poteat, we must not forget that interpretation and language are functions of agents in community in both Niebuhr and Polanyi. We must not be left with the critical dichotomy between act and word. Though agency clearly is central in his treatment of Niebuhr in *Roots of Relational Ethics*, the linguistic bias remains. Christian ethics is "investigation of the Christian style of human life as agents" (p. 102), yet "the Earl Lectures clearly present Christian ethics as ineluctably linguistic" (p. 103). Would it not be more accurate to say that Niebuhr at this point in his unfolding understanding of ethics is exploring the interpretive dimension of Christian agency? The opening chapters of *The Responsible Self* focus on the situation of selves as responsible agents in society, and the Earl Lectures are placed in that context as Niebuhr explores metaphors and the symbolic form of Jesus Christ as keys to Christian understanding and action. As Keiser has pointed out so well with reference to Niebuhr's movement into a postcritical perspective, he is here overcoming the dichotomy between idea and act, between being and doing.

c) Would the significance of Niebuhr's work, as accomplished and as intended, be further clarified by making more explicit his relation to the thought of Michael Polanyi and the postcritical character of his theology and ethics? Perhaps Keiser thought that enough had been said on this subject in his earlier volume, but the hints and references throughout this volume seem to cry out for more attention and resolution. If Keiser understands Niebuhr correctly, then Niebuhr's work is no less grounds for a revolution in theology and ethics than was Michael Polanyi's in philosophy. Together they represent a breakthrough from the critical to the post-critical as remarkable as the turn from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican perspective in astronomy and from the precritical to the critical period in Western thought. Is Keiser working on a third volume exploring the wider meaning of Niebuhr's theology and ethics?

d) In faulting Niebuhr for resisting "praxis," is Keiser not criticizing him for omitting something that was not on his agenda and which his method excluded him from doing in the form that Keiser and others want from him? Keiser explains Niebuhr's position well: though human contexts require responsible action, Niebuhr does not believe it is an appropriate part of Christian ethics to give specific directives. That in his view is the task of social ethics that takes detailed account of the particular situation for involved agents in the light of God's immanent action within it. This view may disappoint us. We should remember, however, that Niebuhr was not by nature an activist and remember also that he had led in bringing the social sciences into ethics. He was well aware of this "deficiency" but insisted on sticking to the task of theology and Christian ethics as he understood it.

We must be grateful to Keiser for his painstaking research and detailed reporting on Niebuhr's thought. The richness and creative brilliance of Niebuhr's work is brought into sharp relief in this volume. All who deal with Niebuhr in the future must take account of Keiser's analysis and evaluation of this major figure in the theology and ethics of the twentieth century.

# McCoy on Keiser's Niebuhr: A Post-Critical Dialogue

R. Melvin Keiser

ABSTRACT Key words: Michael Polanyi, H. Richard Niebuhr, postcritical theology and ethics, response-relational ethics, postcritical spirituality, conversion, language, praxis

*I respond to Charles McCoy's criticisms of my view of Niebuhr's theological ethics by arguing that "conversion," understood as tacit reorientation rather than explicit choice, does accurately depict Niebuhr's 1929 shift in perspective; that "language" emphasized as central to his ethics does in fact hold act and word together; that "praxis," while not a part of Niebuhr's conscious agenda, is inherent in his idea of response; and that Niebuhr's thought is revolutionary which could and should be developed, but by someone else, into a full-blown postcritical theological ethics.*

When one has been so fully understood, one can only respond with silence--initially and finally--and with expression of gratitude. In between, however, I want to take up the proffered dialogue and respond to Charles McCoy's incisive and important criticisms, recognizing and honoring him as a fellow student of Niebuhr's, a "compresence" in Polanyi's postcritical world, and someone who has thought long and deeply about theological ethics. The issues he raises about my interpretation have to do with: conversion, language, praxis, and the postcritical revolution in theology and ethics in Niebuhr's work.

Perhaps "conversion" is a problematical word. If it is taken as an explicit decision or as a change from one explicit structure of interpretation to another, it is certainly misleading. Niebuhr's change of orientation was not a conscious choice. What he changed to was not an explicit framework but a direction, a manner of relating and working, and a way of being, indwelling, the world. Moreover, if conversion means simply a "turning about," his change was not, as this etymology suggests, a mere redirection on the same level in an opposite direction. It was rather a putting down of roots, or better yet, a discovering his rootedness in being. The turning was then away from the explicit detachments from the world of liberal idealism to the tacit embodiment of indwelling the social, natural, and spiritual environments of the world.

If then conversion is understood, not as a reversal on the explicit level, but as a discovery of a seed within the self that sends its roots down into the loam of the world and grows its trunk and branches into the light of day, it is, I believe, appropriate for understanding the last thirty-three years of Niebuhr's work. The development of his thought from this turning (deepening) point is an intricate branching, as McCoy says, an "unfolding" with insights emerging all along the way, but an unfolding, again as McCoy says, that involves "rethinking the entire fabric of theology and ethics" at each stage. Such rethinking--in T.S. Eliot's words, a "pattern new in every moment" ("East Coker")--is not the logical elaboration of a chosen, clear concept, but a groping and unfolding of the meaning of this seed discovered and germinating in his conversion. For this reason, I speak of the metaphor of responsibility as the culmination of his conversion in which he comes to his fullest understanding of its meaning and thus of the meaning of his mature thought. Such an unfolding with the intertwining of branches from the different themes and stages of his life--history, value, faith, feeling, and responsibility--has the dynamism of "reformation" as a "continuing imperative" (as he names his autobiographical essay of 1960), and as McCoy says, of inhabiting not a "palace" but

a “tent” (apparently Niebuhr’s living room, according to a fellow student who visited him in his home, had a feel of reconfigurable spaces rather than fixed immovable furniture).

Agreeing, then, with McCoy’s depiction of “the ongoing development and continuous rethinking that characterized Niebuhr’s method,” the question is whether the word “conversion” can represent this. McCoy implies that my specificity of locating the exact month of Niebuhr’s turning is an “[o]veremphasis on the early conversion” which obscures this unfolding. If the conversion is an explicit choice of an explicit framework so that subsequent work is logical deduction rather than creative emergence, this would be an overemphasis. But what I am naming and locating is not such a conscious thing; it is a paradigm shift, like Copernicus’ or Einstein’s and Planck’s, whose shift in orientation is fraught with meaning that will take a lifetime and more to make explicit. That I can pinpoint the time does not mean Niebuhr could have, although hearing it from another, upon reflection, he might have agreed.

I remember in my editing of Stanley Romaine Hopper’s papers, I wrote in my “Introduction” that the turning point for him into his mature view was in a certain essay. When he read my draft, he thought I had not gotten it right. But upon perusing his own writings, he realized I had in fact located the origin of his mature themes. This is to say, an outside but sympathetic interpreter can see things of which an author tacitly indwelling his own intellectual world is not necessarily conscious. I remember too, in the spring of 1962 at Yale Divinity School, walking down the stairs with Sidney Ahlstrom and at a turning in the stairs we met Mr. Niebuhr ascending. At this initial encounter with Niebuhr since his recovery from his first heart attack, Ahlstrom expressed joy at seeing him and then remarked he had recently been rereading *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* and had concluded that it had been written by a different person. Nodding, Niebuhr said something like, “I suppose that’s true.” He had, of course, written about the major change in his perspective after that book of 1929, but he located it more generally in the 1930s. He would not have been interested or able to be exact as I have been, about this shift in his personal depths in orientation to being, self, and God, since this transformation was something he was attending **from**. My attending **to** it, however, I do not believe, overemphasizes his conversion as a tacit reorientation from which his future thought unfolds and re-forms. While evangelicals, for whom it is a conscious decision to enter an explicit framework, employ the word at the center of their religious views, I do not think we should relinquish conversion to them but own it in its deeper meanings.

With this first issue, McCoy’s and my disagreement has been over the use of a word; with the second matter, our disagreement is over a perspective--over how important language is to the nature of the self in its agency and community. McCoy asks if my focus on language does not “obscure at times the centrality of human action and interaction in response to God’s action” by “forget[ting] that interpretation and language are functions of agents in community.” Should not Niebuhr’s treatment of language at the end of his life, McCoy asks, be understood as a late stage of thinking about Christian agency now in terms of its interpretive dimension? Otherwise, one falls into “the critical dichotomy between act and word,” as, he suggests, I do by almost eliminating the “active motif” with my “emphasis on meaning, metaphors, and the dialogical self.”

But I would say in response that the point of my focus on language is precisely to show how Niebuhr is getting beyond such a word/act dichotomy. The way he overcomes these is not by seeing language as an addition to agency, as McCoy suggests, but is by recognizing the inseparability of them--that word is act and act is word. Language is a function of agents in community, as McCoy insists, but the reverse is true as well--that agency in community is a function of language. As there is no language without agents in community so there are no agents in community without language. While there is much non-verbalized meaning in our lives--perceiving, making, moving, indeed the whole tacit

dimension--it all is pervaded and oriented by our capacities with language. As Polanyi says, learning language is "irreversible." Once we have learned it, the shape and process of our sense-making is forever affected. Language is a "higher" level of meaning that controls the "boundary conditions" of a "lower" level of meaning of our physical sensing and that provides a gradient that orients our tacit dimension towards verbal explicitness. This is, of course, not to say that all meaning gets drawn up into the explicit forms of language, for as William Poteat used to say in class, "meaning presupposes meaning"--language rests upon the unspecifiable and inherently unarticulable meaning rooted in our own bodies, the body of society, and the matter of the world.

As Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, Merleau-Ponty, Poteat, and Polanyi have shown, speaking and writing are action: they have their meaning in use by speakers--as forms of life, the illocutionary force of performatives, the gestural significance expressed from taking up a position in the world, emergents arising from the unreflected intentionalities of our convivial mindbody, and, for Polanyi, as gestalts emerging from the commitments and creative integrations of our tacit dimension. So also the actions we perform are words--if not explicitly said, then freighted with meaning potentially articulable. We would not spend the time we do interpreting human action of individuals and communities if we did not believe those actions were fraught with meaning of linguistic potential expressible in language. My agency is, therefore, pervasively not additionally linguistic. So also are my communities. McCoy's accurate chronicle of Niebuhr's development of the meaning of community from the social force of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, through the faith force of *The Kingdom of God in America*, the inseparabilities within history of reason and faith, individual and community, external and internal in *The Meaning of Revelation*, transcending the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith in *Christ and Culture*, onto a postcritical understanding of faith, value, and theological education are all now illuminated and constellated at the end of his life--as he explicitly realized--by the force field of language. Had he not found language at the core of human agency in community, and agency at the core of words, he could not have hoped for the transformation of society, as he says at the end of "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," through "resymbolization."

The third issue, praxis, is a disagreement over method and the self's relation to it. I would agree "that Niebuhr was not by nature an activist." I remember hanging around after a Common Room speech at Yale Divinity School in 1961 by William Sloane Coffin on his recent civil rights demonstration and incarceration in the South, and listening to Niebuhr ask him irenically some pointed questions about Coffin's aggressive behavior towards the commanding authority of the National Guard, punctuating his inquiry with "I am a moderate." As Niebuhr turned away unsatisfied with Coffin's response, Coffin reached out, grabbing him by the shoulder, and said "Wait! You're my mentor. What do you think?" While I no longer remember his exact words, Niebuhr's answer was an expression of his moderate stance: to change social injustice gradually rather than to confront it precipitously, prophetically.

I would agree with McCoy that praxis "was not on his agenda." Even though Niebuhr did care about justice and fittingness in the human community, he was not about to produce a plan for social action. Nevertheless, I would not agree that his method excluded him from doing it. What kept him from it was his own self-imposed unreconstructed idealistic liberal belief that self-assertion as such is sinful. He did not live long enough to feel the incompatibility of this with his emergent affirmation of response, which, while always reactive to actions already enacted and therefore never initiating in a way detached from a pre-existing context, can be energetically self-assertive in response to God's action upon it.

His method is to attend to the self amidst its response-relations, which extend spatially beyond every human

community to the cosmic community of being and temporally backwards and forwards to our human and cosmic origins and ends, and to attend to the present action of God upon the self within this relatedness. Recognizing this inherently relational nature of the self, Niebuhr's method calls for a social analysis of the complex human system we dwell within. He may have wanted to leave a power analysis of the social system to his brother--as he once wittily remarked to his students, according to Beverly Wildung Harrison, whom I quote: "Several of H. Richard Niebuhr's students have reported that when pressed to address the questions of political power or international power dynamics, H. Richard Niebuhr replied that he would 'leave that to Reinie'" (*Roots of Relational Ethics*, 157-58). Even so, there is nothing in his method to exclude such attention to political and socioeconomic power. Moreover, his method not only calls for interpretation; it calls for response to God's action in what is going on towards fittingness and ongoing transformation.

Nevertheless, while Niebuhr's method calls for response, which is action, the method cannot specify what particular response is fitting--only God can. The fitting response for an individual may be publically invisible yet active, or it may be visibly activist. Either, as a transformative doing within the relational weave of our social existence, affects the social system, and contributes, therefore, to praxis. Thus, while praxis was not on Niebuhr's conscious intellectual agenda, it is on everyone's human agenda, inasmuch as response to divine transformative action is central to his method. Specific directives are not part of Christian ethics, as McCoy says, but neither are they, contrary to McCoy, "the task of social ethics"; rather, they are what goes on within the interiority of each self as it responds to the particularizing action upon it of God. Unless the method of responsibility ethics leads to practice, we are left with the word/act dichotomy McCoy rightly eschews, for praxis is doing the truth of our words, enacting our words' forms of life that presage and effect the transformation of our oppressive systems.

On the fourth and final issue raised by McCoy, I would agree emphatically that "Niebuhr's work is no less grounds for a revolution in theology and ethics than was Michael Polanyi's in philosophy." I did think I had said enough in *Recovering the Personal* about Niebuhr's relationship to Polanyi to make clear Niebuhr's postcritical perspective. In my more recent *Roots of Relational Ethics* I intentionally sought to cast my net wider beyond postcritical and linguistic philosophy and neo-orthodox theology to the contemporary ethical discourse, and thought more would be reached, especially those readers whose various social ethics interrogate social oppression, if I focused my discussion in terms of "relational" rather than "postcritical" ethics. In this I hoped to show Niebuhr's fruitfulness for current ethical thought. While I agree more can be done in describing the postcritical revolution in Niebuhr's theological ethics and actualizing what he did not live long enough to develop, a comprehensive postcritical social ethics, I have no intention of undertaking this project myself.

In my writing thus far, I have been trying to understand my mentors (literally or figuratively) of the past generation--Niebuhr, Tillich, Hopper, Polanyi, and Merleau-Ponty. Now I feel led by divine action upon me and by pleas of my students, my colleagues, and my own children to express my own views rather than only to analyze those of others. I want to begin to speak, beyond analysis, with my own voice, out of my heart, what I have come (am coming) to understand about being religiously in the world. I seek, therefore, (as Polanyi expressed of his own purpose) "to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false" (*Personal Knowledge*, 214). It is time now to attend **from** Niebuhr, Polanyi, and these others, as well as from my commitments as a Friend, to articulate my own religious reflections. I intend to delineate a postcritical spirituality: by "spirituality" I mean any view and practice that affirms, as Niebuhr's does, direct experience of, or the immediate action by, the divine in one's own life--in which the theological, philosophical, and social ethical are integrated.

While I agree further analysis and construction of Niebuhr's postcritical point of view can usefully be done, I would hope my two books on Niebuhr could be an encouragement, even a "stepping stone" (to use Niebuhr's metaphor in *The Kingdom of God in America*, xvi) to someone articulating a full-blown postcritical theological ethics. I believe, however, this would involve serious work in economic, political, and social fields along with theological, philosophical, and ethical reflection. This is required to articulate a comprehensive understanding of our world that will be an effective way of transforming it towards a just, peaceful, and freely creative world beyond the subject-object dualisms and dominations. While such a work is beyond my abilities, I do hope in speaking my own mind and heart to contribute in some modest way towards it.

# Historical and Textual Notes on H. Richard Niebuhr and Michael Polanyi

Phil Mullins

ABSTRACT Key Words: H. R. Niebuhr, Michael Polanyi, science and religion

*This essay discusses historical data that help establish the time at which the Christian theologian and moral philosopher H. Richard Niebuhr became acquainted with Michael Polanyi's thought. It also briefly examines the ways in which Polanyi's philosophical ideas are used in the late publications of Niebuhr.*

## Introduction

Often those interested in Polanyi's philosophical ideas find the ideas of the Christian theologian and moral philosopher H. Richard Niebuhr strikingly complementary. The Niebuhr-Polanyi fit has come up frequently in discussions of papers delivered at the Polanyi Society meetings. Charles McCoy's preceding review article and R. Melvin Keiser's response suggest something of the post-critical ground shared by these figures. Because I was interested in the link between Niebuhr and Polanyi, I began, several years ago, an investigation that has slowly grown into the set of notes below. There are a few references to Polanyi in late Niebuhr writing. The second part of my discussion provides a circumscribed examination of these, showing how Niebuhr used Polanyi. I offer a few hints about ways Polyanian and Niebuhrian themes overlap, but a broader study of convergence I must leave to others who better know Niebuhr's thought. Polanyi met Niebuhr at Yale in 1959 and, although it is not clear he read any of Niebuhr's writings, they were heartily recommended to him by his friend, the ecumenical leader J. H. Oldham, shortly after Niebuhr's death.<sup>1</sup> In the first section below, I discuss some interesting but ambiguous historical information I have gathered about the contact of Niebuhr and Polanyi.

## Niebuhr and Polanyi: Historical Links

In 1993, I began working to discover when H. Richard Niebuhr first encountered Michael Polanyi's thought. My efforts have been modestly fruitful but have also produced puzzling data. Unfortunately, the path to any conclusion is a convoluted one, given that about forty years have elapsed since the critical period. I contacted a number of people who were associated with Polanyi and/or Niebuhr during the late fifties. I wrote Charles S. McCoy and James M. Gustafson, two of Niebuhr's former graduate students, as well as Richard R. Niebuhr (Niebuhr's son and literary executor), to solicit information about when Niebuhr became interested in Polanyi. McCoy thinks it is almost certain that Niebuhr had not heard of Polanyi before 1954 (when McCoy concluded doctoral studies). McCoy first read Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society* in 1957 (at the suggestion of a colleague at the University of Florida) and then *Personal Knowledge* after it came out in 1958. He recalls mentioning Polanyi to Niebuhr in June 1957 and says that he had the impression that Niebuhr already knew something of Polanyi and was interested in Polanyi.<sup>2</sup> Ruel Tyson, then another young scholar interested in Polanyi's ideas, met Polanyi in New York in December of 1956 and believes that Polanyi traveled to Yale and met Niebuhr before returning to Manchester.<sup>3</sup> Gustafson remembers being a guest at a small dinner at Yale hosted by the late Ed Dirks which included Niebuhr and Polanyi. He is unable to date the dinner: it could have been in this period or it might have been on a later Yale visit. Interestingly, Gustafson's primary impression of the dinner was "coming away (as others did) with the impression that intellectual exchange between them really had not occurred."<sup>4</sup> William Scott (who has for many years been working on a biography of

Polanyi) says that Polanyi was in New York at the end of the year in 1956 (when he met Tyson) to give an address on December 28 to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He remained in the U.S. until at least early January of 1957. Archival correspondence indicates he had a meeting with officials of the Rockefeller Foundation on January 2 and then went to Toronto to visit his brother, but returned to the U.S. to give a lecture at Oberlin College on January 7, 1957. Polanyi arrived back in England on January 14 and worked in Manchester on the manuscript of *Personal Knowledge* until he gave a lecture at Cambridge on the last day of the month. This chronology suggests that if Polanyi went to Yale and met Niebuhr on this 1956-1957 trip to the U.S., it was likely in December 1956 or early January 1957 (after January 7 but before January 14, 1957).<sup>5</sup> As I discuss below, Scott reports that Niebuhr invited Polanyi to Yale and he came in 1959, giving a lecture on November 24 from his recently completed essay “Beyond Nihilism.” The dinner Gustafson attended certainly may have been in 1959.

After the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, McCoy wrote Niebuhr about the book and Niebuhr replied that he had been reading *Personal Knowledge* and agreed with McCoy that “he found Michael Polanyi’s thought very congenial.”<sup>6</sup> In what he thinks was November or December 1959, McCoy had lunch with Niebuhr and Robert Calhoun (another Yale professor) who brought up Polanyi in the discussion; Calhoun knew Polanyi’s work and recommended him to Niebuhr who said he already knew of Polanyi and intended to get Polanyi to speak at Yale Divinity School. McCoy recalls hearing that Polanyi did come to Yale in 1960 and that Niebuhr “was instrumental in having Polanyi invited to give the lectures upon which *The Tacit Dimension* was based”<sup>7</sup> (i.e., Terry Lectures). Melvin Keiser, a new divinity student in the Fall of 1960, thinks Polanyi did not come during the fall term of 1960.<sup>8</sup> As noted above, William Scott confirms a late November 1959 visit Polanyi made to Yale. Polanyi returned to England on November 29, 1959; records do not show Polanyi made any other trips to the U.S. in 1960.<sup>9</sup> The Terry Lectures at the end of October of 1962, the series McCoy emphasizes that Niebuhr helped arrange, were delivered after Niebuhr’s death in July, 1962.

Scott’s records showing Polanyi came to Yale in November of 1959 are in part based upon his own experience with Polanyi. Scott was on sabbatical at Yale and, as a physicist interested in philosophy and religion, was invited to meet with Polanyi. H. Richard Niebuhr invited Polanyi to come down from New York to give a lecture. Polanyi was in New York in November 1959 to receive the Lecomte de Nouy award for *Personal Knowledge* and *The Study of Man*. Polanyi had just finished “Beyond Nihilism” which had to be turned in to the printer to be ready for a later Cambridge lecture. Polanyi came from New York, first to Princeton and then to Yale, and delivered “Beyond Nihilism,” first on Nov. 18th and then at Yale on Nov. 24th.

In sum, the historical information turned up by my inquiries is helpful but not altogether precise. By Spring, 1957, Niebuhr possibly had read some of Polanyi’s early works and may have met Polanyi in the previous winter at Yale. Niebuhr probably read *Personal Knowledge* sometime shortly after its publication in June of 1958. Polanyi definitely visited Yale at Niebuhr’s invitation in November of 1959. Before the end of 1959, Niebuhr might have read several things by Polanyi, although there are no references to anything but *Personal Knowledge* in Niebuhr’s writing.<sup>10</sup> At the least, Niebuhr seems to have been quite interested in Polanyi from the time of the publication of *Personal Knowledge* or shortly before, until his death in July of 1962. As I suggest below, other things support these general conclusions.

## Niebuhr's References to Polanyi

Niebuhr discovered Polanyi's work in the mid to late fifties at a stage in his own development in which it seems soundest to describe Polanyi's work, not as a major influence, but as a, to quote McCoy, "very congenial" perspective.<sup>11</sup> The textual references suggest that Niebuhr found Polanyi especially useful for the ways in which Polanyi formulated issues and approached science. As my discussion of Niebuhr's references shows, the fit between a Niebuhrian and a Polanyian approach to some questions was often quite good.

There are direct references to Polanyi's writing only in two of Niebuhr's books, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (With Supplementary Essays)*<sup>12</sup> and *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (posthumously published)<sup>13</sup> Additionally, there are some sections in *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (posthumously published<sup>14</sup>) that use distinctly Polanyian terminology and it seems very likely that Niebuhr is drawing on (but does not directly mention) Polanyi. The references in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (With Supplementary Essays)* are in the final chapter "Radical Faith and Western Science" and in "Science in Conflict with Morality?", a supplementary essay. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* is based upon the Montgomery Lectures on Contemporary Civilization given at University of Nebraska in 1957. Niebuhr indicates that he expanded his three lectures into six chapters and then added other essays that supplement the themes treated.<sup>15</sup> The supplementary essay "Science in Conflict with Morality?" was a lecture given at St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, on February 28, 1959, as a part of a symposium on "The Scientist as Philosopher." Since there are some references to *Personal Knowledge* in this essay, this material was evidently drafted after the June 1958 publication of *Personal Knowledge*.<sup>16</sup> *The Responsible Self* was a posthumously published work taken from the Robertson Lectures that Niebuhr delivered in the Spring of 1960 at the University of Glasgow. A version of the Robertson Lectures with additions was presented as the Earl Lectures at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in February of 1962; the two appendices in the book are selected passages from the Earl Lectures. As I discuss below, two of the three sections where it appears Niebuhr is drawing on Polanyi come in the material in the Earl Lectures.

### A. Polanyian Science and Niebuhrian Radical Faith

The only direct reference to Polanyi's thought in the six chapters of *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* comes near the end of the final chapter, "Radical Faith and Western Science." To appreciate Niebuhr's use of Polanyi, requires a brief review of Niebuhr's argument in the chapter. Niebuhr's stated agenda for this final chapter is

to approach scientific activity and the scientific community with the question: Is there in them something akin to that trust-loyalty syndrome that is encountered in religion and of which there are recognizable elements in politics? And is the struggle of the various forms of faith also enacted in science? (78).

Although there are no references until the end of the chapter, many claims Niebuhr puts forth about science from the first of this chapter are also themes treated in Polanyi's writing. As noted above, it is not possible to compare the original third Montgomery Lecture (1957) and the published text of the last chapter, "Radical Faith and Western Science," which was produced sometime between 1957 and 1960. The reference at the end of the chapter to *Personal Knowledge* means some revision had to have occurred after the publication of *Personal Knowledge* in June 1958. It

is conceivable at least that Niebuhr has digested a substantial dose of Polanyi material, including *Personal Knowledge*, before writing his final published chapter.

Niebuhr points out that the public trusts scientists and they trust each other; faithfulness is very much a mark of relationships among scientists and between the scientific community and the larger public. Niebuhr's larger agenda is showing a parallelism between the types of faith found in religion and in science, but several of his points concerning science seem strikingly Polanyian.<sup>17</sup> Anyone who has carefully read the middle chapters (4-10) of *Personal Knowledge* (1958) or *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), cannot help seeing that Niebuhr's angle of vision for examining science (the "trust-loyalty syndrome") resembles that elaborated in the social, fiduciary, commitment account of scientific work that Polanyi offers. Niebuhr treats the problems of divided loyalties in science; nationalistic science Niebuhr sees as analogous to henotheistic religious faith (79-83). Niebuhr warns against a science that "may find its center within itself" (82). He identifies a "conflict of faiths within science" which arises when any

movement in science which operates on the basis of the principle that man and everything else was made for the increase of knowledge, that "truth" is the key-value and the center of values. Here he discerns the presence of a henotheism not unlike the one he finds in religion that has turned inward and made its own principle of being into a god of faith (82).

What Niebuhr seems to be describing is scientism, an ideology that is enthusiastically but misguidedly committed to the scientific enterprise and ideals. Niebuhr uses this word, along with "nationalism," (in his subsection's concluding sentence) to describe "partial, closed-society evaluations and loyalties" (83). Scientism is a "closed-society" faith that Niebuhr sees as in tension with the "universal faith" (83) of other scientists.

In the final part of his chapter, Niebuhr concludes his discussion of the ways in which interest in science can represent a closed-society faith; he turns to the positive side of his parallel between the "trust-loyalty syndrome" in science and religion: A theologian discerns

alongside of the tendencies toward closed-society orientation in science a fundamental movement that is like the radical monotheism he encounters in religion and of which he sees the presence in political issues (86).

Niebuhr notes that there is something like radical faith in negative form in scientific skepticism about claims of absolute significance and in the vigilance of science against anthropomorphism. In such skepticism,

something is present which is like that *via negativa* in religion which denies the name of God to any limited form or power, not because it doubts the reality of the One beyond the many but because it believes in him (87).

In a second parallel, Niebuhr suggests that, like radical monotheism, science "seems to approach anything and everything in the world as potentially meaningful" (87). Niebuhr extends this point to argue that "despite many defeats the quest for universally valid knowledge of the particular is carried on" (87). Niebuhr next argues that the loyalty in pure science resembles radical faith found in universal religion. What he wants to emphasize here is that

science always involves commitment to universality:

The cause of the pure scientist does not seem simply to be knowledge or truth but universal knowledge, universal truth. He carries on his work with “universal intent” as one who seeks a truth that is true of universal relations and true for all subjects in the universe (88).

The phrase “universal intent,” as Niebuhr notes, is drawn from *Personal Knowledge*. Niebuhr’s footnote (88, number 2) suggests especially Chapter 10, “Commitment” (299-324) in *Personal Knowledge* is important.<sup>18</sup> Polanyi uses the term “universal intent” to suggest that, although knowledge is always personal, knowers are committed that what they passionately believe to be true should also be believed by others who seriously inquire. The term marks Polanyi’s rejection of subjectivism, but also implies the denial that human knowers have direct access to universal validity. For Niebuhr, “universal intent” seems to represent a kind of loyalty in science akin to the loyalty in radical faith:

Science which makes universal truth its cause takes its place alongside universal religious faith and the politics that is guided by universal loyalty, not without tension to be sure but with some community of spirit (88).

Niebuhr does not make clear here that Polanyi’s “universal intent” represents a rejection of both subjectivism and objectivism. What he apparently finds helpful in Polanyi’s discussions is the idea that the scientist must accept belief and commitment as foundational for scientific work. The scientist is committed to the universality of discoveries but simultaneously must refrain from turning such discoveries into “dogmatic ‘truth-systems’ of closed-society faith” (88).

## **B. Science as a Moral Enterprise**

As noted above, the supplementary essay “Science in Conflict with Morality,” published with *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, was originally a lecture delivered in 1959 and likely written after Niebuhr had read *Personal Knowledge*. There is a good deal of overlap with ideas in “Radical Faith in Western Science,” the last chapter in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. The first reference in “Science in Conflict with Morality” to Polanyi comes early in Niebuhr’s introductory discussion of “the difficulty of reconciling science and morality” (127). Niebuhr suggests that scientists are often not happy with the uses to which their work contributes (e.g., Hiroshima); this leads scientists ultimately to ask about the value of their work and the nature of their vocation. Niebuhr notes that these are moral questions and that they have elicited a variety of responses. Some scientists have assumed, like the Greeks, that knowledge is the key to the good life, but Niebuhr comments approvingly on Weber’s study of science as a vocation: this study implies that it is naive to hold such Greek-like ideas and increasingly fewer scientists do hold such views. Thus, questions about the meaning of science as a vocation are pressing ones for scientists. Niebuhr notes that “this question about the meaning and value of science as a vocation” is “a question explored significantly by Michael Polanyi in his book *Personal Knowledge*. . .” (128). Niebuhr then continues to discuss the ways in which science is a social enterprise and is inevitably involved in conflicts between loyalties to society and loyalty to universal knowledge.

Certainly, Niebuhr is correct that *Personal Knowledge* thoroughly discusses the meaning and value of science as the endeavor of a research community and as a domain for individual pursuit of the unknown. Polanyi presents scientific research as an activity in which humans are at their best, passionately exploring the cosmos in which we reside. Polanyi's vision of science and society is perhaps more reminiscent of Plato (he favors hierarchies and anticipates cognitive solutions)<sup>19</sup> than I suspect a Christian ethicist like Niebuhr (one impressed with the sovereignty of God and the idolatry of humanity) could be altogether happy with. But Polanyi does recognize science as a social enterprise and is keenly attuned to the conflicting loyalties that emerge in science as well as between science and society; these are themes in work before *Personal Knowledge* but also carry over into this book.

The second reference to Polanyi comes after Niebuhr turns to a discussion of the morality of science and the effect of science on morality in Western society. Niebuhr mentions Polanyi and Max Weber as exceptional scientists who have "turned to consistent reflection on the ethics of their scientific activity or on ethics as related to such activity" (131). Most science, Niebuhr claims, is oriented in an outward direction rather than toward reflection on its own endeavor. Next Niebuhr discusses how, to the moralist, commitment obviously is involved in the role of scientist. The scientist is committed to pursuing the truth and proceeds in nonpartisan ways. Niebuhr mentions Polanyi's discussions, (quoting *Personal Knowledge*, 299) of the profoundly personal nature of scientific knowing and the committal, believing qualities of personal knowledge (132-133). Niebuhr seems in this section to combine Polyanian notions about commitment and the personal nature of knowing with Roycean language (and more traditional Niebuhrian language) about loyalty:

. . . that science does not explain itself but rests on a commitment, on a loyalty which is personal; that no matter how impersonal all the objects and ends of science, the scientist himself remains even in science a person of whom the moral act of devotion to a cause is required (133).

The balance of Niebuhr's essay elaborates other elements in the morality of science. Some of these elements, such as "scientific conscience" (133), the "established habit of social criticism in the scientific community or communities" (133), and "the faithfulness in truth-telling" (136) parallel ideas developed in *Science, Faith and Society* and *Personal Knowledge*. Niebuhr's concluding note (which also is the end of his book) returns to the point that he earlier cited Polanyi's work to explain:

It pervades all activities. Morality is present in the activity of science itself, as well as in the activity of artistic creation or of religious proclamations, or of government. The question the moralist raises is . . . whether such science is adequately aware of its own moral character and whether scientists are sufficiently philosophic or comprehensive in their outlook so as to be able to order their activities as moral within the whole complex of human personal activities (136).

Niebuhr contends, somewhat like Polanyi, that the ennui of modern life will be challenged only when science (or any other vocation) is recognized as a moral enterprise and when we recover some more holistic vision of persons in relation in a changing historical community.

### C. Polanyian Terminology in *The Responsible Self*

Polanyi's term "universal intent" was apparently a locution which Niebuhr found especially meaningful. He uses the term not only in the last chapter of *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* but also in *The Responsible Self*. Polanyi, however, is not mentioned or cited in *The Responsible Self*.<sup>20</sup>

The first reference to "universal intent" comes near the end of the second Robertson Lecture whose title and focus is "Responsibility in Society." Niebuhr is attempting to describe "self-transcending societies" and the "process of self-transcendence" (87). For the monotheistic believer,

responses to God as the ultimate person, the ultimate cause, the center of universal community, there seem to be indications in the whole of the responsive accountable life of men of a movement of self-judgment and self-guidance which cannot come to rest until it makes its reference to a universal other and a universal community, which that other both represents and makes his cause (86-87).

He discusses how, in his "*cathekontic* ethics or ethics of the fitting," one is "led to the notion of universal responsibility" as

a life of responses to actions which is always qualified by our interpretation of these actions as taking place in a *universe*, and by the further understanding that there will be a response to our actions by representatives of universal community, or by the generalized other who is universal, or by an impartial spectator who regards our actions from a universal point of view, whose impartiality is that of loyalty to the universal cause (87-88).

After setting forth these complex ideas about self-transcendence and the universal in response ethics, Niebuhr shifts the ground to an analogy. He suggests that ethics has a parallel in science "which beyond all generalities seeks the universal in the particular and operates as with universal intent" (88). What Niebuhr seems to be drawing attention to is that science is not merely deductive but "moving toward the particular it seeks in it the pattern that is verifiable by other knowers. . ." (88). Niebuhr suggests that science

seeks to interpret each particular occasion by reference to more general patterns so that the movement is toward the universal. It operates with universal intent. (88).

Although there is no mention of Polanyi, Niebuhr's discussion of his scientific analog seems to be drawing upon some ideas that Polanyi develops regarding the way in which scientists approach their research. He apparently was impressed with Polanyi's discussions about discovery in science and the ways in which scientists put forth claims regarding new discoveries (i.e., with universal intent). It is important, however, to bear in mind that Niebuhr's somewhat cryptic analogical discussion of scientific practice rather strictly serves his main purpose of clarifying the matter of how "universal responsibility" (or, as Niebuhr alternatively states it, "a life of responsibility in universal community" (89) is central to *cathekontic* ethics.

Richard R. Niebuhr introduces the selected material from the Earl Lectures (which is in the two appendices (148-178) of *The Responsible Self*) by saying that he wants to show how these lectures reflect “the endeavor to bring the metaphor of responsibility into a more precisely articulated relation to the figure of Jesus Christ” (148). The Earl Lectures version is more explicitly concerned with Christian ethics and portraying Christian responsibility. Relating the metaphor of responsibility to the Christ is the project of the selected material in Appendix B, “Responsibility and Christ,” a section in which Niebuhr again uses the term “universal intent.” Early in the section, Niebuhr discusses how Jesus was a figure who interprets the action upon him in the context of universal action (167). Later, he suggests that Christian response ethics is concerned also with the attempt to interpret from this broad context. Niebuhr implies that it is profoundly difficult for Christians to interpret all actions upon them as in the deepest sense divine actions that are fundamentally affirmative. Yet such a conviction is put forth with universal intent:

We entertain pluralistic hypotheses about the world in various metaphysical speculations yet we continue to seek to know as those who have a universal intent. We seek a knowledge that will be universally true, though all our propositions are known to be only approximations to universal truth. We have the unconquerable conviction that we confront a oneness behind and in and through all the many-ness in which we live and which we know (175).

In this section, Niebuhr again seems to be adopting Polanyi’s idea of “universal intent,” this time for the purpose of conveying what he regards as the hermeneutical struggle of the radical monotheist.

A second frequently used Polanyian term that appears in *The Responsible Self* is “heuristic.” The index to *Personal Knowledge* lists more than twenty sections of the book that are concerned with “heuristic” or “heuristics.” “Heuristic”, as its Greek root implies, is concerned with “finding” or, in Polanyi’s context, with dynamics of discovery. It is no surprise that an appreciative reader like Niebuhr would pick up this term as a key idea.<sup>21</sup> At one juncture in his Earl Lectures, Niebuhr raises the question about the “relations of the Christ-symbol to other symbolic forms which we bring to the understanding and the shaping of our existence as agents” (157). In order to explore this problem, Niebuhr contends “we must attempt to get at this set of problems with the aid of our heuristic device—the philosophy of symbolic forms” (157). In identifying “the philosophy of symbolic forms” as a discovery strategy or heuristic device, Niebuhr reminds his audience about the broader context of his discussion. He argues in the lectures that symbolic forms are the key to human moral understanding.<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr’s interest in symbol and metaphor is, of course, longstanding; he seems to have found Polanyi’s ideas about heuristics to be a new and valuable way to think about some issues concerned with symbols and their power.

#### **D. Polanyi in *Faith on Earth***

The recently published book *Faith on Earth* contains a single reference to Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. Richard R. Niebuhr, the editor of *Faith on Earth*, indicates that the manuscript materials have a penciled reference to *Personal Knowledge* early in the opening chapter (“Preface”, xi.). This means that H. R. Niebuhr was still revising this chapter in 1958 or thereafter, although some of the material in this book dates from the mid-forties (some writing on the themes treated is even earlier).

Richard Niebuhr notes the thematic similarity of *Faith on Earth*, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, *The Meaning of Revelation* and *The Responsible Self* (“Preface”, xii.). He reports that some readers of the manuscript

material have dubbed it a phenomenological analysis of faith (Preface", ix.). This description seems to me apt. The opening pages of the first chapter, "Faith in Question," introduce several questions that any serious phenomenological inquiry into the nature of faith must address. To start his inquiry, Niebuhr seems to have wanted quickly to articulate a whole set of issues. Near the end of this survey, he mentions that questions about faith, understood as ultimate beliefs (rather than fidelity or faithfulness), arise in discussions about the foundations of science and education. Niebuhr comments, with a footnote to Polanyi, that the "'fiduciary' element in science also comes up for investigation" (2). The footnote clarifies this comment since it praises the "remarkable examination of the fiduciary element in science in *Personal Knowledge*. . . ." Niebuhr indicates that Chapter 10, the chapter titled "Commitment," is especially important. This is the same chapter Niebuhr footnotes for "universal intent" in the final chapter "Radical Monotheism and Western Science" of *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. Here we find one of Polanyi's clearest discussions of belief and trust in science; it apparently was a discussion that impressed Niebuhr. Niebuhr follows his comment about the fiduciary element in science with questions that ask whether scientific inquiry, coherent educational programs and democratic political culture are somehow deeply dependent upon traditional religious faith. Because Niebuhr's focus early in his chapter is upon articulating (but not really exploring) several broad questions, it seems most sensible to construe the reference to Polanyi here as a suggested supplementary perspective. This seems to be a late addition to the text that simply marks Niebuhr's recent appreciation for Polanyi's discussion of the fiduciary structure of science.

The major point of Niebuhr's opening chapter in *Faith on Earth* points to the ironic inevitability of his "trust-loyalty syndrome":

Belief and trust and fidelity and their opposites are forever present as active attitudes in the very subjects who make them the objects of their inquiry or disputation (20).

Although these words did not come from *Personal Knowledge*, they well might have. The pervasiveness and interrelation of belief, trust and fidelity are at the center of Polanyi's analysis of every human knower's situation. Polanyi describes what he calls the "fiduciary framework" in terms of this interrelation:

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community; such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original can operate outside such a fiduciary framework (266).

In *Faith on Earth*, Niebuhr characterizes personal agency in terms of the reciprocal interaction of belief, trust and fidelity:

*Fides*, *fiducia* and *fidelitas* (to use the Latin words which have the advantage that they all represent variations of one root, as believing, trust and loyalty do not) are not three different meanings of the word faith but three parts of one interpersonal action in which *fides* (believing) is the phenomenal element which is largely based on the fundamental interaction of *fiducia* (trust) and *fidelitas* (loyalty or fidelity) (47-48).

Niebuhr's sentence could have been seamlessly inserted after Polanyi's first sentence in the preceding quotation. The kinship of Polanyi and Niebuhr's philosophical accounts of persons as active beings in relation is sometimes striking.

In sum, the Niebuhr references to Polanyi seem to show that he was aware of his affinity with Polanyian philosophical views. He found Polanyi's account of science as a moral enterprise in which the "trust-loyalty syndrome" operated especially insightful. He appreciated Polanyi's analysis of the "universal intent" embedded in responsible personal knowing; he found "universal intent" a fruitful notion with which to discuss not only science but also responsibility.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>J. H. Oldham letter to Polanyi, December 29, 1963, Box 15, Folder 5, Papers of Michael Polanyi, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. Oldham suggested that Polanyi look at Niebuhr's supplementary essay "Faith in Gods and in God" in his *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (With Supplementary Essays)*. While Oldham recommended Niebuhr's entire volume, he advised Polanyi to read especially this short essay since it "has been to me one of the most illuminating expositions of the contemporary religious situation that I have met with"(quotation used with permission).

<sup>2</sup>Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993.

<sup>3</sup>Phone conversation with Tyson May 17, 1995. He is clear about the period because it fell between his December, 1956 first visit with Polanyi in New York and his period of working with Polanyi in Manchester which commenced in Fall, 1957.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from James M. Gustafson dated November 29, 1993.

<sup>5</sup>Scott's chronology, discussed here and below, is used with his permission. Most of these details should be in the published biography. My letter of June 8, 1995 set forth the relevant questions about Polanyi's movements; Scott forwarded these queries to Monika Tobin, his biographical assistant who had the records, and she provided further details about Polanyi's movements in her letter of June 13, 1995. Conversations with Scott in July, 1996 and with Ann Scott in July, 1997 helped clarify details discussed below about Scott's own work at Yale in 1959 and his first meeting with Polanyi.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993 with subsequent phone conversations in May 1995.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from R. Melvin Keiser dated May 17, 1995.

<sup>9</sup>. Letter from Monika Tobin, biographical assistant, dated June 13, 1995.

<sup>10</sup>Niebuhr's reading might even have included *The Study of Man* (published in 1959) as well as shorter essays and

earlier publications in addition to *Personal Knowledge. The Study of Man* probably would have been of interest to Niebuhr since it focuses on the nature of historical studies and the place of history in the spectrum of disciplines. See the discussion below regarding the original lectures in 1957 and 1959 which form the basis of material in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (With Supplementary Essays)* and in which there are references to Polanyi.

<sup>11</sup>As noted above, McCoy's correspondence with Niebuhr in this period suggested "the kinship between Polanyi and Niebuhr was even closer than I had thought." McCoy reports Niebuhr's response was that "he found MP's thought very congenial" (Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993).

<sup>12</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (With Supplementary Essays)*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960, Torchbook edition, 1970). When the context is clear, references hereafter are noted in parenthesis (to the Torchbook edition) or with the shortened title and page number.

<sup>13</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). When the context is clear, references hereafter are noted in parenthesis or with the shortened title and page number.

<sup>14</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). When the context is clear, references hereafter are in parenthesis or are by shortened title and page number. As I note, it must be remembered that this book was published after Niebuhr's death and lacks references that he might have added; see my discussion below and note 20.

<sup>15</sup>So far as I can determine, the original three lectures, given April 1, 3 and 5 in 1957 (according to the University of Nebraska archival records) are nowhere available for review. It is therefore impossible to compare the original third lecture (which likely treated radical faith and political community as well as radical faith and western science--i.e., material now in the fifth and sixth chapters) and the published sixth chapter "Radical Faith and Western Science" in which the reference to Polanyi and *Personal Knowledge* appears. The University of Nebraska apparently had an agreement to publish revised material produced by Montgomery lecturers. Niebuhr's material, under the title *Radical Monotheism and Western Civilization*, was published in 1960 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press). The title page and the following leaves indicate that the "Montgomery Lectureship on Contemporary Civilization" has as its purpose "to generate constructive thought on contemporary issues." In the "Acknowledgments," Niebuhr indicates that the original three lectures have been divided and revised and expanded to six chapters. Except for the supplementary essays, this published version is the same as all of the later editions published under the title *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. For some further remarks on the setting of the Montgomery Lectures and the different editions of the published work, including Niebuhr's selected "Supplementary Essays," see Gustafson's "Foreword" to the recent Westminster/John Knox edition of the book (3-8).

<sup>16</sup>The references could, of course, have been added, if Niebuhr revised his lecture before the publication of the book which includes it; he, however, gives no indication he has revised the original lecture, although he does so indicate with other material that was originally generated for another purpose. See "Acknowledgments" (9) and the footnote to the title of the essay (127).

<sup>17</sup>Niebuhr's argument at the macroscopic level is concerned to show that all domains of culture can be organized

according to the three faiths, polytheistic faith, henotheistic faith and radical faith. Religion, politics and science are the areas he uses to display the logic of his argument. Niebuhr's discussion of science is one that requires distinguishing the three ways (polytheistic, henotheistic and radical faith) in which science may be pursued. The overall conceptualization of Niebuhr's chapter is in terms of the kinds of faith and his schematization of the kinds of science. This architectonic likely owes nothing to Polanyi but Niebuhr seems to find Polanyi's ideas helpfully fit into his scheme. I am indebted to Diane Yeager for incisive and helpful comments about the overall shape of Niebuhr's argument.

<sup>18</sup>Perhaps it is particularly Polanyi's section titled "The Structure of Commitment: I" (308-312) that Niebuhr found provocative: here there are some emphatic statements which link responsibility and universal intent. This is more overtly the interest in the use of "universal intent" in *The Responsible Self* (discussed below) but it is closely akin to interests here. The index for *Personal Knowledge* prepared by Marjorie Grene, makes clear that Chapter 10 is an important one for the discussion of "universal intent" but that the term is used or applied throughout the whole book.

<sup>19</sup>See my discussion in "Hermeneutical and Aesthetic Applications of the Thought of Michael Polanyi", diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1976, 211-214. Polanyi's image of the good society arises largely from his convictions about the worthiness of and requirements for human inquiry in domains like science. His notions about social organization are in a certain sense grounded in his epistemology, although certainly the statement of Polanyi's mature epistemology followed much of his writing about social organization.. Skills and interests are the foundation of human knowledge; society, for Polanyi, needs to be a stable, open context (he seems quite happy with participatory democracy in which certain civil liberties are guaranteed) in which specialized skills and interests can be nurtured, passed forward and employed in the serious communities of specialized inquiry seeking the unknown. To a certain degree, Polanyi offers a justification for a hierarchically structured society that appears akin to visions of Plato. Society requires and supports subcommunities in which excellence is cultivated and recognized; interactive patterns and authority reflect the value placed upon exploration and creativity.

<sup>20</sup>I am indebted to R. Melvin Keiser for pointing out that this term and "heuristic" do appear in *The Responsible Self*. Keiser believes that Niebuhr's vocabulary came to include both "universal intent" and "heuristic" (discussed below) after studying *Personal Knowledge*; at the least, neither term appears in Niebuhr's writing before 1958, the year *Personal Knowledge* is published (Letter from R. Melvin Keiser dated May 17, 1995).

<sup>21</sup>Richard Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Oxford University Press: 1977) argues that the discovery metaphor is the central metaphor for understanding all of Polanyi's thought (see especially 3-28).

<sup>22</sup>Keiser's discussion in *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) of Niebuhr's "postcritical" approach to symbolic forms is particularly insightful (58-61). In his opening paragraphs, Keiser indicates of Niebuhr that "exploring the reflections of his last years, I have been struck by the 'postcritical' nature of his methodological preoccupation" (xvii). Elsewhere in his book in the context of a discussion of Niebuhr's affinities with several twentieth century philosophers, Keiser briefly discusses elements of Polanyi's thought that support the sort of reflection Niebuhr was doing. He provides some evidence, quoting from unpublished Niebuhr material, about what in fact Niebuhr saw in Polanyi's thought. The quotations mentioning Polanyi indicate Niebuhr was appreciative of Polanyi's critique of doubt as well as his recognition of the importance of trust, passion and commitment, and the centrality of the person (see 49-53).

# Torrance on Polanyi and Polanyi on God: Comments on Weightman's Criticisms--A Review Essay

John V. Apczynski

ABSTRACT Key Words: Polanyi, Torrance, reality of God, philosophy of science, natural theology, science and religion, Barth

*This review discusses Weightman's interpretation of Torrance's appropriation of Polanyi's theory of science; Weightman shows how Torrance develops a contemporary "natural" theology, moving beyond Barthian roots, but he argues Torrance misconstrues Polanyi's understanding of "religion" and God. I support Weightman's account, acknowledging much of his argument regarding the nature of religion, but I question whether his constructivist view of God can support the role it must play in Polanyi's thought.*

Colin Weightman. *Theology in a Polanyian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994.

One of the most respected exponents of Michael Polanyi's thought, Thomas Torrance is a Reformed theologian who established a strong personal relationship with Polanyi toward the end of his life and who became his literary executor at his death. In this fascinating study, Colin Weightman presents a detailed analysis of the way in which Torrance develops Polanyi's epistemology and hierarchical view of the world by making it a constitutive feature of his theology. This allows Torrance to formulate a kind of "natural theology" that moves him beyond his Barthian starting point. In this process, however, Weightman contends that Torrance misconstrues Polanyi's understanding of religion and places a burden on Polanyi's scientific view of the world which it cannot legitimately bear. Weightman bases this critique on a well-crafted introductory argument that defends an underlying consistency for Polanyi's understanding of religion expressed in his writings all the way through the publication of *Meaning*. Except for the linchpin of his argument, which interprets Polanyi's understanding of God along the lines of Don Cupitt's (a-)theological position, Weightman defends, in my estimation, successfully and insightfully his basic claims.

In the larger, second part of his book, Weightman explains how the Barthian starting point of Torrance, that theology, as is the case with all sciences, must operate in terms of a faithfulness to its object, remains constant in all his subsequent developments. Unlike Barth, however, Torrance does not limit this understanding of theology to expressing the meaning of God's revelation of God's self through Christ in Scripture. For Torrance, there is an urgent need to express this revelation of God in terms of the cultural assumptions of the modern world. To achieve this, while remaining faithful to the revelation of God, Torrance must find some sort of "hook" in the contemporary understanding of reality that is "objectively" capable of allowing a meaningful expression of the divine reality. Here is where Polanyi's hierarchical understanding of the universe developed in terms of fields of overlapping marginal control functions as a *crucial* component of Torrance's theological position. Weightman argues that Torrance extends Polanyi's scientific vision of reality into a sort of "natural theology" bridging the revelation of God with a contemporary understanding of the world.

While this move beyond Barth provides Torrance with the tools for an impressive theological outlook, it does not come without its costs. In order to maintain the Barthian understanding of the objectivity of theological science,

Torrance must construe Polanyi's hierarchical field vision of the world to be an inherently accurate portrayal of the deep structures of nature, harkening back to an earlier Christian, non-dual understanding of reality. While I had never noticed this before, Weightman has persuaded me that such a strong metaphysical claim is indeed required by Torrance's theological position. And to the extent that it is, it places on Polanyi's understanding of nature a burden which Polanyi himself would not accept. For Polanyi was ready to acknowledge that even this fundamental conviction, while certainly revealing an aspect of reality, was subject to revision.

Furthermore, this hierarchical vision requires Torrance to capitalize on an ambiguity in Polanyi's epistemology in order to extrapolate to an understanding of God operating at the level of the marginal control for the universe as a whole. But this is unsatisfactory in several respects. For example, a consistent application of this approach would negate the transcendence of God, something Torrance is unwilling to do. Weightman exposes such an inconsistency by pointing out how Torrance expects theology to operate as the higher level of meaning controlling the boundary conditions of all lower levels of meaning, but without being subject to any of the constraints that these lower levels of meaning might place on it. The source of his reservation, of course, is Torrance's theological conviction of the objective reality of God. This conviction, according to Weightman, is the fatal flaw in Torrance's understanding of Polanyi's epistemology.

That Torrance's unwillingness to allow for an immanence to his doctrine of God does indeed lead to such unsatisfactory dilemmas Weightman is quite correct in arguing. But that this is due to Torrance's mistaken understanding of the role of God in Polanyi's epistemology has not been persuasively justified for me. The proper way of construing "God" in Polanyi's thought is, of course, a hotly contested issue. Polanyi's position holds, according to Weightman, that there is no ontological referent to the word "God." Rather, the term refers to the "meaningfulness" that religious people experience in worship.

Weightman's defense of this interpretation is developed in the first part of his book, where he attempts to show how Polanyi's understanding of the way religion functions has remained fairly constant throughout Polanyi's published writings. I believe he is correct in this appraisal of Polanyi's thought. Polanyi appears to have understood religion (by which he normally meant a liberal style of Christianity) as a form of indwelling through which a believer was able to break out (in *Personal Knowledge*) or to be transported (in *Meaning*) toward some sort of ultimate meaning which could bring together otherwise incompatible meanings of our ordinary existence. The contested issue concerns the status of this experience of "ultimate meaningfulness." Is it an imaginative construction that remains completely within the form of religious life or does it open the believer to a divine reality that grounds this meaningfulness? For Weightman, the former is the only consistent way to understand the Polyanian literary corpus.

The crux of Weightman's argument on this point, as I understand it, is found in Polanyi's insistence that the reality of God is discovered in worship and, as such, Christianity can say nothing that is true or false. Furthermore, Polanyi's emphasis on the "apophatic" character of mystical experience emphasizes that "God" cannot be comprehended through concepts. Finally, his later use of Eliade's views on myth and ritual transporting participants into the sacred realm suggests the necessity of participation in the religious tradition to experience its meaning. Polanyi unquestionably upholds all of these views. From them Weightman concludes that religious meaning has no ultimate reference point but is found solely by dwelling within it.

In the course of his defense of this conclusion, Weightman repeatedly declares that Polanyi's position does not allow the reality of God to be external to the religious form of indwelling *in the way a scientific reality* is external

to the community of scientific beliefs (e.g., 45, 56). This is, without a doubt, true. But when Polanyi insisted that the meaning of God is known in the first instance performatively in worship or ritual and that this meaning thus known cannot be comprehended conceptually as mystics have insisted, I think he was groping for a way of expressing the reality of God as the basis for the fundamental meaning that he believed he experienced for the universe as a whole. And precisely because this reality was the ground of meaning for the universe as a whole, it could not be an external reality in the manner of an empirical object, for that could not bear such a meaning. I do not think Polanyi ever found a way of expressing this conviction to his own satisfaction, and this failure is what accounts for the apparent ambiguity of Polanyi's position on this point. But in exploiting this ambiguity in the direction of the wholly internal meaning of God, I believe that Weightman has failed to show how Polanyi could consistently affirm his own conviction in the ultimate significance of the universe (125).

# Polanyi and Mathematics, Torrance and Philosophy of Science: A Response to Apczynski's Review

Colin Weightman

ABSTRACT Key Words: Michael Polanyi, Thomas Torrance, John Apczynski, mathematical realities, religious realities, phenomenology, natural theology, philosophy of science

*The question of how Michael Polanyi understood religious realities has often been debated. I suggest, in this response to a review of my book on Polanyi and theologian Thomas Torrance, that Polanyi's treatment of mathematical realities can throw light on his understanding of religious realities (like "God") especially since he clearly links or groups these in a number of places. In addition, I point out that Torrance develops and moves beyond the Barthian theological tradition in his adoption of a Polanyian natural theology.*

My thanks are due to John Apczynski for his generous but probing review of my book on Thomas Torrance and Michael Polanyi, *Theology in a Polanyian Universe*. Apczynski makes some comments on my treatment of Torrance's use of Polanyi (which was my major focus), but then centers his critical comments on my understanding of Polanyi's understanding of "God." This is natural enough in a review for a journal devoted to the thought of Michael Polanyi, but I am quite happy to share why I think that my reading of Polanyi is the correct one. I will add however what some of my larger agendas were in the writing of the book since this may also be of interest to some readers.

But even as I say these things, I am conscious myself of the need for caution since all commentators on Polanyi are agreed (I think) that Polanyi is the opposite of open and clear about his own religious commitments. Even those who confidently venture an assessment should at the very least admit that his "view" on "God" needs to be carefully teased out or perhaps extrapolated from clues in the text since it is definitely not "up front." Indeed, though I do have a point of view, I also readily admit to my own fallibility and do not consider that I have all things right, especially in matters Polanyian.

Perhaps Apczynski's comment that Polanyi was "groping for a way of expressing the reality of God as the basis for the fundamental meaning that he believed he experienced for the universe as a whole" is a good starting point for discussion. However I would prefer to express it as a groping after a religious perspective and not necessarily as a groping after "God." In my reading of Polanyi, I would certainly affirm that such a "religious groping" is evident in his work. I make reference to it myself at various points. But if his groping continued to the end of his life, then it is difficult for us who would commentate on and hope to learn from him to do much more than reflect that groping ourselves. For this reason, I do not expect that this debate will ever conclude unless some discovery of lost Polanyi material adds to our information on the matter.

I agree with Apczynski that for Polanyi the affirmation of a meaningful universe was fundamental. I also want to stress this most strongly with regard to Polanyi. All his life, from his reading of Dostoevsky onwards, he stood against a purely mechanistic conception of humanity. But how to anchor a vision of a meaningful world in some divine "ground of being" is the problem to which Polanyi never came to a satisfactory answer. The simplest answer from my perspective (since this is what I personally believe) is that the world has been created by God and this imbues it with meaning from

the very beginning. Now this is not to underestimate the difficulty of the questions that can arise even from this seemingly straightforward statement but at least it grounds the meaningfulness of things in something deeper and more fundamental. For this reason I do not consider that I have “created Polanyi in my own image” since my perspective is one that I looked for but did not (alas) find in his writings.

The problem with God creating the world for Polanyi is that he finds the very concept extremely difficult to grasp and in *Meaning* he wonders whether it is conceivable at all (p.125). His reluctance to conceptualize God in either Tillichian or in any other theological terms gives us nothing concrete from him in which to “ground” the meaningfulness of the universe. For this reason, I do not think that **anyone at all** has shown how Polanyi can consistently affirm his conviction in the ultimate significance of the universe. I don’t think it is possible for anyone to show this and so I did not attempt it myself. This is certainly frustrating, but unfortunately, the way it is. It appears then that this is a missing link in Polanyi’s thought and in my estimation no one has demonstrated clearly that they have uncovered it. Of course, each one of us may have our own way of showing how Polanyi **should have** grounded his conviction in the ultimate significance of the universe. It may even be that we do so in a Polanyian-like fashion, but this is not the same thing as setting out Polanyi’s own justification for his assertion of the ultimate meaningfulness of things.

Apczynski is right in noting my statements that Polanyi does not allow the reality of God to be external to the religious form of indwelling in the way a scientific reality is external to the community of scientific beliefs. However, this comparison was less central to my argument which flows rather from Polanyi’s comments on religion **and mathematics** and the sense in which Polanyi himself considers that “realities” may be “external.”

To show what I mean, we need to go to Polanyi’s concluding comments in his chapter on “Intellectual Passions” in *Personal Knowledge* (p.202). Here he talks about the verification and validation of articulate systems. Though the distinction might be somewhat fuzzy at the margins, Polanyi uses the word “verification” to refer to the testing and acceptance of the empirical sciences and the word “validation” to refer to the testing and acceptance of other articulate systems, and he gives the examples here (and in this order) of mathematics, religion and the various arts. His penultimate sentence is then: “But both verification and validation are everywhere an acknowledgment of a commitment: they claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker.” A key question here is what does Polanyi mean by “external to the speaker” in relation to validation?

It is highly significant (I believe) that both here and in numerous places Polanyi links or groups mathematics and religion together. This occurs at fundamental places in his argument and the significance of this needs to be more carefully examined. Firstly, for Polanyi, mathematical realities are realities in his distinctive and unique sense of “that which is expected to reveal itself indeterminably in the future” (*SFS*, p.10 and cf. also *PK*, pp. viii,5,43,64,117,130,147,189) Yet mathematical realities may be totally nonempirical. Some mathematical terms like aleph-three, explains Polanyi, “do not refer to particular things at all, and may be altogether empty categories, well-defined, but applying to nothing” (*PK*, p.86). Therefore (and like religion also?) mathematics looks for an indeterminate range of future manifestations **within** mathematics itself.

It seems to me that the claim of validation that something real exists external to the speaker is not a claim by Polanyi that the “realities” in question are, like empirical objects, necessarily external to the corresponding system, but rather is a claim that realities exist which are real in his distinctive sense of having a life of their own, even though they themselves might be internal to their respective systems. It is in this sense of having a life **of their own** and not simply

being dependent on the one who names or speaks them that they are primarily to be considered “external” (cf. *M*, p.66).

To conclude this particular discussion then, Polanyi leaves quite open the possibility that religious realities (for example “God”) are analogous to mathematical realities and might be entirely contained within the articulate system of the Christian religion. In my view, his numerous comparisons of religion with mathematics make this the most likely impression that he wishes his reader to take away with them. It was certainly the impression he left in my mind. Here again, this is not my personal perspective on the reality of God, but I believe that on the evidence of the text that it is Polanyi’s. This comparison of religion and mathematics and their respective “realities” is the core of my argument then, and not any comparison of religion and science. But please note that this argument is not cast in the form of a knock-down proof since while I think the thrust of his writing is compelling enough on this, he has never given us that final unambiguously clear confirmation of his view. And we all need to acknowledge this lacuna together.

My larger concern has been the interaction of various theologians with various philosophies of science. Another major thesis focussed on Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Popper, for example. So my concern in this book was to take a close look at what Torrance is doing when he interacts with the thought of Michael Polanyi. As will be apparent already to those who know something of Torrance’s writings, I do not interpret Polanyi in the same way that Torrance does. Indeed, though I have some theological kinship with Torrance, I was quite critical of the way in which Torrance tried to relate his theology to the contemporary scientific worldview and contemporary philosophy of science (both of which he interprets primarily through Polanyi’s eyes). Therefore, though I have also learned things from Torrance, I take in my book a much needed critical look at Torrance’s whole attempt to relate theology and science. More than enough has been written by supporters of Torrance and I felt that a more probing assessment needed to be undertaken. This I have done, though I hasten to add at this point that the onus is now on me to produce my own constructive contribution to the debate and if life-circumstances permit me I intend to do just that. Then of course others will do the same for me as I have done in my more critical writings! I might add, however, that in an epilogue to the book I have begun to examine the relationship of theology and science.

What was my conclusion about what is happening theologically in Torrance’s interaction with Polanyi? Very briefly, it is that Torrance’s development of the Barthian tradition has resulted in a Polanyian natural theology which serves as the epistemological substructure of all the sciences including theology, which, as some will know, Torrance considers a science in a quite specific sense. Though Torrance will without doubt contest this strongly, my assessment is that in adopting a Polanyian natural theology Torrance is in his own way creatively relating theology and philosophy in a manner not unlike Rudolf Bultmann or Thomas Aquinas and in so doing has decisively moved beyond his Barthian roots. I recognize that these few brief sentences (and Apczynski’s own brief summary) leave much to be desired since they stand rather naked without the full argumentation. To decide between my conclusion and Torrance’s position, the reader will, of course, have to read my book, and some of Torrance’s if they have not done so already.

However, I would like to conclude this response to John Apczynski’s review where it begins in the title, in the question of the significance of mathematics in Polanyi’s thinking. I am sure that my background in pure mathematics led me to ask this question more readily than those trained in (say) art history. I had a natural tendency to read with care any sentence with the word “mathematics” in it. However, it does seem to me to be more significant than most commentators on Polanyi have realized. This is all the more so if I am right in suggesting that religious realities in Polanyi are analogous to mathematical realities. This would mean then that information on Polanyi’s understanding of mathematical realities could well throw some light on his view of “God.”

Leaving Polanyi's views aside for a moment, the question of the nature of mathematical reality is a fascinating one in itself. The key question here is: "Is mathematics a human creation or does it exist in some kind of non-physical, eternal and necessary realm (a doctrine sometimes called mathematical Platonism)?" More briefly again, is it created or discovered? The answer is by no means easy and it is significant that in his own struggle with this kind of question Edmund Husserl (who trained first as a mathematician) developed what we call phenomenology. Though I cannot go into it here, it was in his struggle to understand **mathematical reality** that this way of thinking was developed. (On this see Granville Henry, *Logos: Mathematics and Christian Theology* (1976) pp.163-70).

But, unfortunately again, Polanyi does not enter this discussion himself. He supports Husserl's attempt to safeguard the contents of experience against reductive analysis and phenomenology's affirmation of higher, less tangible levels of experience since these are things he wishes to emphasize himself, though he is critical of phenomenology's lack of any notion of tacit knowing or levels of reality (*KB*, pp.221,236). Mathematical and religious realities, of course, would be considered by Polanyi to be intangible realities, if not the most intangible of realities. But here, I think, we draw near again to the limits of what may be known with any certainty about Polanyi's views on these matters. For example, we might wish to ask whether Polanyi saw mathematical and religious realities as on the same level, or as one above the other (and note that there are two possibilities here). Polanyi does not, to my knowledge, give us any information on this. If he did, this would provide us with some significant clues about his views on religious realities. Perhaps all that I can suggest at this juncture is that a close examination needs to be conducted of all his comments on mathematics to see if anything relevant on this may be gleaned from them. Perhaps I may--if I have any time among the demands of my present existence as a parish minister--take up this task since it is a question that I have not previously taken to the text myself, at least not in quite this form.

## Submissions for Publication

Articles, meeting notices and notes likely to be of interest to persons interested in the thought of Michael Polanyi are welcomed. Review suggestions and book reviews should be sent to Walter Gulick (see addresses listed below). Manuscripts, notices and notes should be sent to Phil Mullins. Manuscripts should be double-spaced type with notes at the end; writers are encouraged to employ simple citations within the text when possible. Use MLA or APA style. Abbreviate frequently cited book titles, particularly books by Polanyi (e.g., *Personal Knowledge* becomes *PK*). Shorter articles (10-15 pages) are preferred, although longer manuscripts (20-24 pages) will be considered.

Manuscripts should include the author's name on a separate page since submissions normally will be sent out for blind review. In addition to the typescript of a manuscript to be reviewed, authors are expected to provide an electronic copy (on either a disk or via e-mail) of accepted articles; it is helpful if original submissions are accompanied by an electronic copy. For disks, ASCII text as well as most popular IBM and MAC word processors are acceptable. Be sure that electronic materials include all relevant information which may help converting files. Persons with questions or problems associated with producing an electronic copy of manuscripts should phone or write Phil Mullins (816-271-4386). Insofar as possible, *TAD* is willing to work with authors who have special problems producing electronic materials.

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# Reviews

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Arthur J. Dyck, *Rethinking Rights and Responsibilities: The Moral Bonds of Community*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994. Pp. x+441. ISBN: 0-8298-1006-4.

With this book, Arthur Dyck, who has served in various capacities at Harvard University over the past 30 years, both extends and modifies the direction set out in his earlier work, *On Human Care*. He extends and develops his account of the moral bonds of community, but significantly modifies Roderick Firth's ideal observer theory which plays such a central role in the previous work. The context for this evolution in Dyck's thinking is the topic of rights, one which he thought would find strong support in the philosophical literature. His research, however, convinced him that, "1. Human rights are being seriously violated not only in practice but in theory. 2. Theories of rights . . . foster separation and undermine the human relations that make communities possible. 3. Theories of rights . . . that insufficiently protect individual human life appear to be gaining in strength . . ." (p. 2). In light of these findings, Dyck sets out to discover the source of the problems in rights discourse and to clarify how we can overcome them.

He proceeds in three parts. The first consists of an historical survey in which Dyck takes Thomas Hobbes, John Calvin, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Nicolai Lenin and Alan Gewirth as paradigmatic figures representing significant milestones in the development of human rights discourse. In the second part of the book, Dyck offers an account of the conditions that make it possible for communities to exist and to reproduce themselves. It is in these conditions that Dyck finds sufficient grounding for human rights. In the final section, Dyck moves to a concrete application, suggesting what his differently grounded account of rights would mean for an understanding of justice, as applied to divorce laws and health care reform in the United States.

As Dyck recounts the history, he finds that all his interlocutors all share a significant mistake, in spite of significant differences between them. All devalue the relationships which bring persons into being and nurture them. For Hobbes, all human associations are artificial and essentially coercive (23). Calvin does not deny the essentially social nature of human beings as Hobbes does, but his emphasis on law as external constraint on egoistic impulses obscures the moral significance of parenting and other relationships (39-40). For Bentham and Mill, rights must be justified by the principle of utility, which cannot transparently ground what Dyck takes to be a foundational right, i.e., the right to life (67). Marx, Engels and Lenin view rights as the product of corrupt societies and take for their standards a vision of the ideal society of the future (94-5). Gewirth, who treats rights as universal and natural, still understands the moral agent as an autonomous individual, without acknowledging the webs of relationships which enable that person to become an agent (116).

In developing his phenomenology of community, Dyck identifies several prerequisites of community which are, at root, moral. These include a knowledge of the past, a hesitancy to take human life, commitments to speak the truth, to respect property, and to be faithful to one another in sexual relations (Ch. 5). Moreover, these communities tacitly hold to a "natural theology" which exhibits faith that a cosmic moral power exists, that goodness is more powerful than evil and that morally-responsible behavior is ultimately vindicated (Ch. 6). It is in our recognition of these conditions, Dyck contends, that we can know our responsibilities for one another which ground rights that are therefore "natural."

Dyck clearly argues that we can know, in a substantive sense, what these rights are. Here, Dyck stakes a claim between skeptics or relativists on one side and objectiv-

ists on the other. He argues that moral knowledge is rooted in the emotional attachments that are nurtured in communities. These emotional attachments are the “felt necessities” or basic facts of morality. Of special interest to readers of this journal will be Dyck’s explicit and extended use of Michael Polanyi’s description of science as an endeavor in which knowledge begins with felt necessities (“intuitions”) and is generated by participation and training in a particular community (211-223).

Once one makes emotions (specifically, what Dyck calls, “loving impartially”) the basis of moral knowledge, however, one becomes vulnerable to the criticism that self-love or love of one’s own community in fact can and does distort moral commitments by narrowing them to only a select few. Dyck acknowledges the concern, but counters that these are instead the building blocks of all morality. “Put very simply,” Dyck says, “individuals cannot know how to behave toward themselves and others unless they have positive affection for themselves and others” (206). In the end, what keeps self-love or love for one’s community from being restrictive is what Dyck calls “Ideal Companionship.” It is here that Dyck departs significantly from Firth, as the ideal is no longer a dispassionate observer, but a participant who is able to relate empathically to all other persons (Ch. 9). The ideal companion functions for Dyck as something like Reinhold Niebuhr’s “impossible possibility” by providing a goal which we seek to attain in an ever more comprehensive manner.

There is much to commend about Dyck’s work. It offers a very readable and accessible criticism of human rights theories and points to a promising way of reconstructing them. It is an engaging book, drawing from a number of sources aside from the philosophical, such as studies in psychology. Dyck’s proposal will resonate with and find allies in several other fields. His emphasis on community will strike chords with communitarian strands of political theory, while making emotions central to cognitive processes will find its allies among feminist thinkers and others working on the moral centrality of the passions. His work thus proceeds in conversation with significant movements in the scholarly community.

A weakness of the book is that community remains for the most part, an abstract noun. While much of what Dyck says seems intuitively reasonable, a thick description of a variety of communities from around the world would strengthen the author’s position that there are indeed universally-occurring conditions in which communities flourish and which provide the leverage needed for developing an intelligible and defensible account of rights. Additionally, there are some discussions that beg for more comprehensive development. For example, given his concern for the preservation of innocent life, Dyck’s position would seem to commit him to defining life as biological functioning and to nonviolence, but those positions are not explicitly articulated or clarified. Finally, there are some implications of the work that could be profitably explored. One important implication concerns the general utility of seeking to provide a theoretical grounding for human rights. If Dyck is right that moral cognition is indeed grounded in emotions, then perhaps what we need to develop is a set of strategies and practices that will help us become sensitive to the humanity of those who differ from us.

Perhaps the greatest value to the work is that the author seeks to bridge modern and post-modern perspectives. At the same time that Dyck wants to work in a broadly communitarian direction, he continues to affirm much of the Enlightenment project’s search for universal moral standards which will enable us to live at peace with one another. One might thus describe his proposal as a kind of Kantian communitarianism. Some will therefore likely find his work to contain a juxtaposition of positions that are incompatible with one another. Conversely, others will find it fruitfully creative. I suspect that those who read the book sympathetically will find it to be the latter.

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## Notes on Contributors

**John Apczynski** teaches at Saint Bonaventura University; his book *Doers of the Word* (1977) draws extensively on Polanyi to do theology. Additionally, Apczynski has published a number of articles in *TAD* and other journals using Polanyi; he set up and is the moderator for the electronic discussion group sponsored by the Polanyi Society.

**Colin Weightman** is an independent scholar working also as a Uniting Church in Australia parish minister in northern New South Wales. He has university qualifications in pure mathematics, education, religion, and theology and works mainly in multi-disciplinary areas which utilize this background. His doctorate was completed at the Department of Studies of Religion of the University of Queensland. He has presented papers on the relationship of theology and science and other topics to several conferences and is the author of the 1994 book discussed in this issue, *Theology in a Polanyian Universe: The Theology of Thomas Torrance*. Weightman can be reached by post at 18 Figtree Avenue, Junction Hill, New South Wales, Australia or by e-mail (cwei@nor.com.au).

**R. Melvin Keiser** is Professor of Religious Studies at Guilford College, Greensboro, NC 27410. He has been a member of the Polanyi Society since its early days and has published through it “Lived Time: A Polanyian Meditation on the Self and God in Augustine’s Confessions” (*Convivium* 18 [March 1984]: 4-13) and “Reflection, Structure, and Psyche in Post-Critical Perspective” (*TAD* 14:1 [Fall 1986]:21-20) as well as essays in several other journals. He is coeditor of a volume of essays by Stanley Romaine Hopper as well as author of two books on H. Richard Niebuhr, *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Postcritical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr* (1988) and *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr* (1996) discussed in this issue. Keiser was a Niebuhr student during the last two years of Niebuhr’s life; through Niebuhr, he encountered Polanyi’s writing and came to hear Polanyi’s Terry Lectures at Yale in 1962.

**Charles S. McCoy** is Professor Emeritus at Pacific School of Religion/ Graduate Theological Union (1798 Scenic, Berkeley, CA 94709). McCoy’s several books on theology, ethics, and religion and higher education make significant use of Polanyi’s philosophical ideas as do many of his articles, such as “The Polanyian Revolution: Post-Critical Perspectives for Ethics” (*TAD* 18:2 (1991-92): 33-39). McCoy discovered Polanyi’s writing in the mid fifties shortly after completing his doctoral work with H. Richard Niebuhr with whom he had some conversations about Polanyi. For many years, McCoy regularly taught graduate seminars on both the thought of Polanyi and the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr at the Graduate Theological Union.

**Phil Mullins** teaches in an interdisciplinary program at Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (e-mail: mullins@mWSC.edu). Since 1991, he has been the *TAD* editor; for several years prior to that, he was the coordinator for the Polanyi Society annual meeting. Recently, Mullins assembled a Polanyi Society WWW site (<http://www.mWSC.edu/~polanyi/>) which pulls together a variety of resources on the Polanyi Society, *TAD* and other Polanyi journals as well as the “Guide to the Papers of Michael Polanyi.” Mullins has written a number of articles on or using Polanyi’s thought; other recent publications focus on emerging electronic culture and the ways in which religious ideas and practices are being reshaped by digital media.

### Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to "owner-polanyi@sbu.edu" to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.

## Polanyi Society Membership

*Tradition and Discovery* is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. This periodical supercedes a newsletter and earlier mini-journal published (with some gaps) by the Polanyi Society since the mid seventies. The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries though most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are normally two or three issues of *TAD* each year.

The regular annual membership rate for the Polanyi Society is \$20; the student rate is \$10. The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due September 1 to Phil Mullins, Humanities, Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, MO 64507,. Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the following information: subscriber's name as it appears on the card, the card name, and the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be mailed, faxed or e-mailed to Mullins (e-mail: mullins@griffon.mwsc.edu ; fax: USA 816-271-5987).

New members must provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), institutional relationship, and e-mail address and/or fax number (if available). Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing.

The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and /or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.