

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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."⁴ 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).⁵ 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.”⁶ 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”⁷ (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 1960.⁸ 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 1960.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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)*¹² and *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (posthumously published)¹³ Additionally, there are some sections in *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (posthumously published¹⁴) 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.¹⁵ 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*.¹⁶ *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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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)¹⁹ 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*.²⁰

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 "*cathekotic* 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 *cathekotic* 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.²¹ 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.²² 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

¹J. 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).

²Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993.

³Phone 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.

⁴Letter from James M. Gustafson dated November 29, 1993.

⁵Scott'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.

⁶Letter from Charles S. McCoy dated September 27, 1993.

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

⁸Letter from R. Melvin Keiser dated May 17, 1995.

⁹. Letter from Monika Tobin, biographical assistant, dated June 13, 1995.

¹⁰Niebuhr'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.

¹¹As 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).

¹²H. 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.

¹³H. 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.

¹⁴H. 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.

¹⁵So 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).

¹⁶The 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).

¹⁷Niebuhr'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.

¹⁸Perhaps 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.

¹⁹See 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.

²⁰I 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).

²¹Richard 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).

²²Keiser'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).