APPRAISING NEWBIGIN’S APPROPRIATION OF POLANYI

presented by

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at the annual meeting of the

Polanyi Society

at the 2010

American Academy of Religion

It is both delightful and somewhat intimidating to share my paper before this audience of Polanyi scholars. Many of your names appear in the footnotes of this paper. I very much welcome your suggestions for how I might improve the interpretation and history of Polanyi that I present herein.

Nearly ten years ago, a brief debate ensued in Tradition and Discovery concerning the legitimacy of Lesslie Newbigin’s theological appropriation of Polanyi’s epistemology. The participants in the discussion found the exchange illuminating, and some recommended further analysis of the way that Newbigin incorporates Polanyi’s thought.¹ I hereby respond to that invitation, inspired by the conviction that Newbigin applies Polanyian themes to a topic whose relevance only increases in time: the intellectual status of faith in religiously pluralistic societies. An increasing number of scholars are now acknowledging that modernity brings in its wake secularity but plurality. There is thus a growing recognition that religious pluralism deserves further attention from political theorists, philosophers, and theologians alike.²

I here attempt to shed further light on the motivation for and fidelity of Newbigin’s use of Polanyi’s ideas. I will pursue this aim by enlarging the historical context in which the discussion of Newbigin and Polanyi has thus far proceeded. From the perspective afforded by this expanded context, I will seek to defend two claims. First, Newbigin sticks fairly close to Polanyi in arguing that religion and science —when properly understood—can occupy a shared space of true knowledge. Second, Newbigin consciously extends Polanyi’s thought in a new direction by addressing the normative claims on culture that arise from the particular tradition of Christianity.

I begin by reviewing the history of Newbigin’s interest in Polanyi. How, after all, did a missionary theologian come to care about the work of a philosopher of science? I believe that attending to the personal histories of each person reveals that Newbigin’s attraction to Polanyi was motivated by their common intellectual sympathies and their shared respect for J. H. Oldham.

Since Newbigin was nearly 50 years old before he first read Polanyi, Newbigin’s prior experiences played a substantive role in allowing him to understand and inspiring him to embrace Polanyi’s work. In his adolescent years, Newbigin found in pragmatism a philosophical support for his wavering religious belief.³ After his faith was intensified by a religious vision, Newbigin retained a practical approach to Christianity. He spent time serving the poor, and he sought to integrate his master’s-level study of theology with this undergraduate degree in economics.⁴ Newbigin’s academic work is also marked by attention to epistemological concerns that he would later find elaborated more fully in Polanyi. For example, in a paper on “Theology’s Claim to be a Science,” Newbigin states that all knowledge depends on the knower’s “passion for truth.” While it takes honest skill “to recognize a

¹ George Hunsberger affirms that there is “great promise” in exploring the “fertile” and “fascinating” intersection of the thought of Polanyi and Newbigin. Hunsberger therefore “welcome[s] continuing dialogue along these lines.” David Kettle similarly claims that “further exploration of Newbigin’s thought and its connection with Polanyi’s work will be a fruitful pursuit.” See, respectively, George R. Hunsberger, “Faith and Pluralism: A Response to Richard Gelwick,” Tradition and Discovery 27, no. 3 (2000-1): 19, 28; David Kettle, “Newbigin, Polanyi and Impossible Frameworks,” Tradition and Discovery 28, no. 2 (2001-2): 22.


⁴ Ibid., 11.
fact,” Newbigin adds that “it takes interest to find it at all.”5 After finishing his academic studies, Newbigin spent over 30 years serving as a Christian missionary among Hindus in southern India.

This intellectual and experiential background helped prepare Newbigin to be positively inclined toward Polanyi’s ideas. Polanyi, like Newbigin, manifests certain affinities with pragmatism.6 Polanyi is also interested in bringing moral and religious convictions to bear on economic matters pertaining to the common good of society.7 Furthermore, Polanyi describes with precision the experience of acclimating within disparate intellectual frameworks not unlike the religious worldviews that Newbigin navigated as a Christian from the West in dialogue with Hindus from the East.8 Thus, despite the obvious differences between the careers of these two men, their similar intellectual sympathies and personal experience made it possible for Newbigin to understand and appreciate the work of Polanyi.

One further reason why Newbigin was positively inclined toward Polanyi is that both figures were influenced by the theology of J. H. Oldham. A public intellectual and a leader in the modern ecumenical movement, Oldham first mentored Newbigin during his college days and then collaborated with him on the merger of the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council. Oldham not only alerted Newbigin to the crisis of faith that had spread throughout Europe while Newbigin was in India; Oldham also diagnosed as the cause of this waning faith the ascendancy of Enlightenment ideals that culminated in logical positivism.9 Oldham therefore insisted that Newbigin read Polanyi’s critique of positivism in Personal Knowledge as soon as the book was published.10

Oldham knew Personal Knowledge very well because he has been one of only two people whom Polanyi asked to help edit the book.11 Polanyi had taken Oldham into his confidence after the two interacted over the course of three years in a discussion group called “the Moot.” This group consisted of intellectuals like Karl Mannheim, T. S. Elliot, and John Baillie who had committed to thinking about the era’s critical issues “in a Christian way.” Polanyi judged that the Moot provided him some “most profitable” experiences that had changed his life.12

One such change was the theological education that Polanyi received from Oldham. Oldham introduced him to the work of professional theologians—including John Oman,13 Newbigin’s academic advisor from Cambridge.14 So much did Polanyi grow to trust Oldham that he apparently allowed Oldham to add some theological material to Personal Knowledge that Polanyi did not himself completely understand.15 Because Oldham was influential in shaping Polanyi’s views of religion, it is possible that part of what attracted Newbigin to Polanyi’s work were the traces of Oldham’s thought that Newbigin found therein. This connection helps explain why Oldham

5 Quoted at Geoffrey Wainwright, Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 337. Wainwright summarizes from this same paper Newbigin’s view on the relation of science and religion, which “neither concede[s] the monopoly of the title science to a narrowly quantitative approach to the world nor permit[s] religion to be confined to the realm of the private and the individual, the esoteric and incommunicable” (ibid.).
8 For Polanyi’s account of how an “interpretative framework” or “fiduciary framework” impacts one’s perception of particulars, see Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59-77, 145-71, 266-68.
9 Speaking of a lecture delivered in 1933, Newbigin states, “J. H. Oldham, in a profound and prophetic address, spoke of the radical departure of Europe from Christian faith when it followed Descartes and the pioneers of the Enlightenment” (Newbigin, Unfinished Agenda, 26).
10 Wainwright, Lesslie Newbigin, 21-22.
13 Scott and Moleski, Michael Polanyi, 212-13.
14 Newbigin, Unfinished Agenda, 28.
15 When visiting Duke University in 1964, Polanyi was approached by a student who asked him to clarify the meaning of an allusion in Personal Knowledge to the “unexpected lessons” that may yet be derived from the Bible. Polanyi replied somewhat sheepishly, “Oldham had suggested that” (Scott and Moleski, Michael Polanyi, 212-13; compare Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 285).
found *Personal Knowledge* to have taken a “powerful hold” over him and why Newbigin judged the same text to be among the most crucial books that he had ever read.

Soon after first reading Polanyi, Newbigin immediately began referring to him in lectures and publications. Yet Newbigin would not have time for extensive speaking and writing until he retired from missionary service in 1974. For a brief period of time, Newbigin and Polanyi lived only 70 miles apart—Newbigin in Birmingham and Polanyi in Oxford. Before Polanyi’s death in 1976, it seems that the two never met. Newbigin’s retirement years were prolific, and his publications show an increasingly deep engagement with the work of Polanyi. Newbigin scholar Paul Weston even calls Polanyi’s thought the “hermeneutical key” to understanding the mature work of Newbigin.

I believe that an appreciation of this history that I just sketched can help us appraise the fidelity of Newbigin’s appropriation of Polanyi. The prior debate in * Tradition and Discovery* resolves around two issues pertaining to Newbigin’s use of Polanyi. The first issue is whether Newbigin collapses Polanyi’s account of the differences between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge.

Richard Gelwick claims that Newbigin’s attempt to present Christianity as a kind of fact disregards Polanyi’s account of the differences between science and religion. George Hunsberger replies that Newbigin does retain clear distinctions between science and religion. Support for Gelwick’s criticism can be found in the interpretations of Newbigin espoused by theologian William Abraham and missiologist Lamin Sanneh. The former claims that Newbigin’s reliance on Polanyi causes him to conflate the Christian message with a universal theory of knowledge, leaving faith “marginalized by the philosophical ideas developed to protect it.” The latter judges Newbigin’s dependence on Polanyi an effort to transform the Christian story into a “surrogate rationality” in the manner of Christian apologists during the modern era.

Knowledge of the shared sympathies between Polanyi and Newbigin can help us to see the respects in which these criticisms of Newbigin are based on misapprehensions of Newbigin’s views. Recall that Polanyi and Newbigin share Oldham’s concern for the demise of religious faith in Europe; following Oldham, they also consider positivism a primary cause of this secularizing trend. Furthermore, Polanyi and Newbigin refuse to resolve the apparent conflict between science and religion by suggesting that the two comprise separate, non-intersection domains. Instead, Polanyi and Newbigin hold that there is “common ground” between science and religion. Polanyi states, for example, that both science and religion can “claim the presence of something real and external to the speaker.” I think that it is especially significant that Polanyi and Newbigin share the conviction that the primary obstacle to acknowledging this common ground is a general ignorance of the passionate, fiduciary,

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17 Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, 21-22. After first reading *Personal Knowledge*, Newbigin resolved to re-read the book every ten years. Near the end of his life, he reported that he had kept this schedule by reading the book “several times” (ibid.).
25 Polanyi considers religion an “intellectual system” like mathematics that “does depend on factual evidence”—even though it can never be proven by empirical facts (Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 280, 284). Polanyi also denies that religion is a “separate dimension” with no bearing on science or history. He instead affirms that facts about nature can “offer us a common ground with religion” (Michael Polanyi, “Science and Religion: Separate Dimensions or Common Ground?,” *Philosophy Today* 7, no. 1 [1963]: 4). Newbigin, in turn, praises Polanyi for “unmask[ing] the illusion that science is a separate kind of knowledge, sharply distinguished from the vast areas of our everyday knowing” (Lesslie Newbigin, Foreword to *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* by Drusilla Scott [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], v).
communal, and historically contingent character of science. The two agree that when science and religion cohere, both forms of knowledge are decidedly personal rather than positivist.

These broad areas of consensus show that Newbigin sticks fairly close to Polanyi in accounting for the relationship between religion and science. Newbigin does not suggest that religion can be validated by scientific facticity or rationality. He is simply too Polanyian to grant the notions of science, fact, or reason the intellectual prestige and final veridical authority that positivists do. Newbigin aspires to make Christianity “plausible” or “credible”—not scientifically proven. And Newbigin follows Polanyi too closely to imagine that intellectual credibility could be achieved by appealing to uninterrupted facts. Instead, Newbigin claims, the plausibility of the Christian faith will only become apparent to one who indwells the religious tradition and learns to interpret all of reality through the presuppositions of faith. When Newbigin says that the Christians have a “fact” to share with the world, he is seeking to preserve what we might call the newsiness of the Bible’s “good news.” Newbigin specifies the simple content of this fact in the claim that “God had acted” in the person of Jesus. Thus, Newbigin does not appeal to this singular “fact” as a scientific justification for faith; instead, he is reminding Christians of the biblical interpretation of a particular historical event.

Even though Newbigin fails to employ some of the same terminology that Polanyi uses in differentiating science and religion, Newbigin still retains the spirit of Polanyi’s main distinction. Polanyi holds that scientific knowledge can be precisely “verified” by external evidence, though religious knowledge can only be generally “validated” by internal evidence. Newbigin employs a similar distinction concerning the intellectual assurance possible through scientific and religious ways of knowing. Newbigin is explicit that people of faith cannot have “certainty” in the same way that one might obtain by reliance on scientific principles and realities. Instead, religion only permits a form of “confidence” that is based on trust in the fidelity of God.

One way to summarize Newbigin’s use of Polanyi is thus to say that Newbigin closely follows Polanyi in his negative and general apologetics, yet Newbigin ventures further than Polanyi in the task of positive and specific apologetics. Newbigin draws on Polanyi’s own arguments in categorically defending religion against attacks based on mistaken notions of scientific objectivity. Yet Polanyi has less to say about the positive justification of any particular religious faith, so Newbigin thinks that he must go beyond Polanyi in seeking ways to show the public plausibility of Christianity.

Newbigin’s positive apologetic is the focus of the second disputed point raised in the Tradition and Discovery correspondence. At issue is whether Newbigin retains Polanyi’s mystical and accommodating religious outlook. Gelwick holds that Newbigin is not as “open and progressive” toward religious pluralism as was

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29 Compare Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 150-60.
32 Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 202, 321.
33 Newbigin, Proper Confidence, 2. Newbigin acknowledges various other differences between science and religion. For example, he holds that the object of religious knowledge is a person, whereas much scientific knowledge takes as its object inanimate or non-volitional beings. Furthermore, Newbigin claims that a scientific method of knowing rules out teleological considerations, though religious ways of knowing do not (Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 49-50).
34 Newbigin, Proper Confidence, 14.
Polanyi. Hunsberger replies that Polanyi’s epistemology does not strictly require any particular approach to religious pluralism, though Newbigin is affirming of God’s presence and activity among non-Christians. David Kettle also insists that Newbigin shows an openness to theological revision in the light of interfaith dialogue.

I believe that attending to Newbigin’s history can also shed light on this second area of dispute. Newbigin’s early work merely appeals to Polanyi an as authoritative interpreter of how scientific knowledge is acquired. Yet as Newbigin gained a greater facility in using Polanyian concepts, he attempted to apply Polanyi’s insights to a goal beyond that which Polanyi had pursued. At various points, Newbigin self-consciously extends Polanyi’s thought in a new direction not explored by Polanyi. Thus Newbigin states that he will “take a further step which Polanyi does not take” and “lead us further than Polanyi himself explicitly goes.”

Newbigin’s “further step” involves applying a Polanyian concept to the interface between religion and culture. Newbigin takes Polanyi’s notion of asserting beliefs with “universal intent” to imply that religious beliefs should be offered as “public truth” in a given society. Thus Newbigin claims that Polanyi provides “great help” to those who wish to test the truth of Christianity by bringing its normative claims to bear on the culture of late-modern Europe. Newbigin states, “Polanyi’s work is of great importance...to those who are trying to commend the Christian faith to a skeptical generation.” Yet Newbigin is not naïve about whether Polanyi would have approved of this application of his insights. Newbigin explicitly recognizes that Polanyi did not intend his work as a form of positive religious apologetics. Indeed, Newbigin admits about Polanyi, “I don’t even know whether he was a Christian.”

Newbigin and Polanyi therefore differ in their treatment of the relationship of religion and culture—both because Polanyi does not address this subject at length and because Newbigin is more religiously specific in his work. Polanyi talks generally of the “supernatural aspect” of experience, religious worship, the existence of God, and “the religious meaning of things.” His rare references to theologians engage the work of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Paul Tillich. Newbigin, by contrast, speaks extensively about the Christian doctrines of revelation, election, redemption, mission, and the church. His theological interlocutors are people like Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Alastair MacIntyre, and N. T. Wright. The differences between the two on matters of Christianity and culture thus seem to be largely a result of their divergent interests rather than any substantive distortion of Polanyi’s thought by Newbigin.

I therefore conclude that Newbigin provides an extension of Polanyi’s thought in a new direction that is largely consonant with Polanyi’s ideas. For those of us interested in the proliferation of Polanyi’s work, Newbigin provides an interesting specification of Polanyian insights to a topic not extensively explored by Polanyi himself. As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, religious pluralism seems to be one of the lasting hallmarks of contemporary society. Those who wish to explore how the particular tradition of Christianity might engage with religious difference in a manner informed by Polanyi would thus do well to consider the model provided by Lesslie Newbigin.

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40 Newbigin, The Other Side of 1984, 29; Newbigin, Proper Confidence, 42-43.
41 Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 65, 311.
42 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 92, 126, 192; Newbigin, Truth to Tell, 1-2.
44 Newbigin, Foreword to Everyman Revived, iv.
45 Ibid.
47 Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 279-86.
48 Ibid., 197-98, 280-83.
49 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 66-140, 222-41.
50 Wainwright, Lesslie Newbigin, 21-22.