Fundamental questions about the proper relation between reason and religious faith appear to have taken on particular urgency today. Michael Polanyi lived in the midst of the devastation of two world wars and saw at the heart of this devastation the hubris of modern confidence in the physical sciences and their misconstrued, so-called “formal” and “value-free” methodologies. This misconstrual, as he perceived it, was largely a result of the modern assumption that scientific, or “truly objective,” knowing was ultimately based on critical doubt and as having no necessary reliance on an acts of faith, or intuition in the sense of fiduciary commitment. In dealing with the question of what constitutes true “objectivity,” Polanyi criticized the prevailing notion of an “objectivism [that] seeks to relieve us from all responsibility for the holding of our beliefs,”¹ and, reflecting upon his own decades of experience as an accomplished and highly-acclaimed chemical physicist, he made the claim – startling to the ears of modernity – that even the procedures of scientific discovery and reasoning cannot ultimately be reduced to the following of explicit and sufficient rules, but rather are thoroughly and inescapably dependent, from beginning to end, upon such “personal” acts as judging, choosing, and committing, themselves essentially expressions of trusting, or faith.

But, as much of a “Copernican” revolution as Polanyi brought about in our rethinking of the nature of true “objectivity” with his reminder of the inescapably fiducial dimension in all knowing, and thereby his challenge to the prevailing assumed methodological paradigm of science, we find ourselves -- at the beginning of a new century – still confronted with devastating conflicts still being played out on the world stage which, I submit, are largely attendant upon a lingering failure still to comprehend the nature of faith, and particularly a failure to come to an understanding of faith that comports with what we can defend as specifically religious faith. Only when we have accomplished such an understanding, that thoughtfully and responsibly embraces religious faith, can we hope to come to a satisfactory resolution of the, not only alleged, but the real gap, indeed crisis, that exists in the world today between what is presently
represented as reason and faith, and thereby more fully to understand the proper relation between the two.

The magnitude of the present-day crisis has increasingly commanded the attention of world leaders, both secular and religious – most recently, from Kofi Annan to Pope Benedict XVI. Samuel Huntington’s warning of a “clash of civilizations” has come to manifest itself in the headlines on almost a daily basis as a clash among fanaticized and militarized expressions of the world’s religions. In recent years, in fact, many scholars indebted to Michael Polanyi’s epistemological thinking have given serious attention, in books and articles they have authored, to various aspects of this matter of faith and reason, productively bringing both their and Polanyi’s insights to bear. I am indebted to a good number of them, including persons present.² It is my conviction that Michael Polanyi, more than any other recent thinker, has pointed the way toward a substantial resolution of the misunderstandings that have too often, not only in the present but throughout history, pitted faith against reason and reason against faith.

In the title to this essay, I have deliberately indicated that what I propose is a Polanyian resolution to the perceived conflict between faith (having in mind specifically religious faith) and reason – not Polanyi’s resolution – simply because it appears to me that, as far as he has led us in the right direction, he did not completely succeed in providing such a resolution. This is, of course, a separate question from that of whether he himself felt that he had succeeded, or even whether he even intended to resolve such a conflict. These latter questions continue to be debated more than thirty years after the 1975 publication of Meaning,³ a collaborative effort of Harry Prosch and Michael Polanyi in the latter’s declining years. The controversy was provoked, in part, by what some perceived as discrepancies in that work between Polanyi’s earlier and later thinking and also, in part, by both alleged and documented exchanges between these collaborators (and sometimes with others) regarding the extent to which Polanyi’s thoughts had been accurately reported in that book. As documented in William Scott’s and Marty Moleski’s excellent biography on Polanyi⁴ and in a recent essay by Phil Mullins and Marty Moleski in Tradition and Discovery,⁵ Polanyi himself, near the end of his life, conveyed conflicting messages that vacillated between enthusiastic approval and equally strong disapproval of the final expression given to his ideas.
It appears to me, in accord with what I take to be Richard Gelwick’s position in this
debate,⁶ that it was, indeed, Polanyi’s grand vision and aspiration to bring epistemological unity
to all areas of knowing, including both science and religious faith; and that, further, he had
*essentially* laid the groundwork for accomplishing this despite apparent inconsistencies and
ambiguities that arose as he tried – not only in *Meaning* but also earlier, in *Personal Knowledge*,
and in various articles – to extend the application of his fundamental concepts, so well
accomplished in his earlier scientific reflections, to the even more complex – and more alien to
Polanyi’s own professional experience – process of discovery and knowing in the humanities,
and specifically in matters of religious faith. However, this apparent grand vision of Polanyi’s
must be weighed in the context of his sense of his own limitations in speaking authoritatively
about matters of religious faith. Scott and Moleski report that

> when [in 1967] he received an invitation from the University of Sussex to talk on
> the relationship between religious knowledge and other kinds of knowledge, he
> refused, saying he found the theological evaluation of his writings in some articles
> and dissertations “far beyond his scope.”⁷

Still, it also seems to me plausible that – in light of the fact that Polanyi expressed, in this
same period prior to his final decline, an intention to make his concluding philosophical work his
major one, in the sense of hoping to bring all harmoniously together, and perhaps even thinking
(contrary to Prosch⁸) that, in his own mind, he *had*, at least in principle, accomplished this –
upon viewing the final and explicit product of his collaboration, came to the conclusion that this,
in fact, had *not* been as thoroughly accomplished as he had hoped. Harry Prosch’s devoted and
painstaking efforts to give accurate representation to Polanyi’s ideas required of him, especially
in regard to Polanyi’s skimpily expressed thoughts on religion, a fleshing out of those ideas,
which could well have made any shortcomings and inconsistencies of those thoughts, within his
larger body of work all the more obvious. And, in his final state of confusion, and now
frustration, it was certainly easy for Polanyi to attribute this failure, as he did, to Prosch’s
interpretation of his ideas, not to any failure on his own part to explore, or at least to clearly
communicate, the full implications of these ideas as he tried to extend their relevance beyond
science into the humanities. But here, I emphasize, I largely speculate. Given the fact that
individuals who worked closely with Polanyi and knew him well, among themselves, represent
opposite sides in the debate, it is conceivable that the controversy will continue, perhaps
indefinitely, without resolution. Having, myself, had only limited contact with Polanyi in the later years of his life, it is certainly not my intent to resolve the issue here.

However, on the quite different question – and one more relevant to our present task – of whether Polanyi did, in fact, succeed in bridging the gap between scientific reason and religious faith (quite apart from whether he intended to, or thought he had accomplished this), I find myself within what appears to be a virtual consensus, at least among theologically versed students of Polanyi, who concur that this great philosophical mind, who probed arguably more deeply and profoundly into the modes of scientific thought and discovery than any other twentieth-century thinker, did not meet with the same degree of success in his much more limited (Scott and Moleski, in their biography of Polanyi, use the word “scattered”\(^9\)) attempts to understand religious and theological thought. In his brilliant 2004 doctoral thesis,\(^{10}\) Tony Clark attributes this disparity to the fact that two of the conditions that Polanyi saw as essential for the understanding of science – (1) an ongoing participation in a community of fellow scientists and (2) a thorough “indwelling,” or comprehension, of the subject matter of science – and which he, indeed, eminently embodied in regard to science, he unfortunately lacked in his attempt to extend the fundamentals of scientific epistemology to all other areas of learning and knowing, including the humanities, and particularly religion. In regard to the latter, although broadly “Christian” in his inclinations and affections, Polanyi neither identified himself as a participant in any specific religious community nor was he well-versed in theology, Christian or other.

Still, it was more than a failure simply to extend the principles of scientific discovery and knowing to the religious endeavor. As Professor Clark points out, a methodology must, to some degree, be formed and developed “in response to the object of its concern.”\(^{11}\) To the extent that Polanyi does not, in sufficient depth, come to comprehend the particular subject matter of religious faith, in particular Christianity, he fails to demonstrate clearly and consistently the relevance of his epistemological principles to religious thinking, as he was so successful in doing in regard to scientific thought. However seminal and promising they clearly are for the eventual development of an all-embracing epistemology, when applied to a subject matter as divergent in its content as spiritual matters are from those of natural science, some of these principles appear to lack the refinement, flexibility, and consistency adequate to accommodate matters so qualitatively disparate. Yet, Polanyi’s epistemology – I agree with Tony Clark – provides us with invaluable insights and conceptual tools for gaining a profounder understanding of both
faith and reason. And, I further propose in this essay (again consistent, it would appear, with Clark’s assumptions) that these same insights and concepts of Polanyi, fleshed out and deepened to accommodate the idioms and experiences that characterize the Christian faith, allow us to bridge the gap that, for at least three millennia, has been assumed inherently to exist between faith and reason.

What I am saying is that, precisely because Polanyi does not appear to me to have succeeded in completely and coherently bridging this gap, I have chosen not to refer to my present effort as an exposition of Polanyi’s position. However, I do not hesitate to refer to it as “Polanyian” because, in formulating this proposal, I am thoroughly indebted to the profound conceptual insights that Michael Polanyi has provided in his ambitious and inspired epistemological observations which extend over a very productive period of three decades – from his 1946 publication of *Science, Faith, and Society* to his much debated collaborative effort with Harry Prosch in 1975.

II. Modern Approaches

To be sure, there are a great number of major thinkers, among them both theologians and philosophers, who have argued that, *in principle*, to the extent that religious faith is grounded in revelation and that reason is, by definition, autonomous from revelation, neither one can enter into productive, or even relevant, conversation with the other. This separationist position was probably never more radically represented than it was by the second-century Christian apologist, Tertullian, who starkly asserted, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” But it is the modern period, particularly beginning with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and its formalized and depersonalized perception of reason, which we tend to think of as characterized by this division. And yet, ironically, one of the most respected theologians of the twentieth century, John Baillie, reminds us that what gave the late eighteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher the title of ‘father of modern theology’ was that he succeeded in “depart[ing] altogether from the old dichotomy of reason and revelation and found what seemed to be a middle way between the two.” I would add to the category of early modern theological pioneers who were intent on breaking down the old dichotomies a major early eighteenth-century thinker who, in fact, preceded Schleiermacher – the Anglican bishop, George Berkeley, although his writings are generally considered more broadly philosophical than specifically theological.
And, Professor Baillie reminds us of the ‘other Friedrich,’ contemporary with Schleiermacher, (indeed, whose dates of birth and death fall within three years of Schleiermacher’s), Friedrich Hegel, who managed to accomplish a similar unification, although from a more secular and strictly philosophical perspective.

Numerous succeeding theologians and philosophers were influenced by one or another of these three giants in their subsequent efforts at bridging faith and reason. Among the nineteenth-century theologians, these included Søren Kierkegaard and Edward Caird. And this goal of reconciliation continued to be perceived as part of the theological task well into the next century. We can see it in the theological formulations of such diverse twentieth-century thinkers as William Temple, Nicolas Berdiaev, Martin Buber, Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, Donald and John Baillie, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Similar efforts at more secular rapprochements between faith and reason were being made during this same three-century span by such eminent philosophers as Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead – of course, each in his own way.

I find two things to be of particular note in regard to the modern theologians I have mentioned here. First, with the exception of the Jewish theologian/philosopher, Martin Buber, they are all either Protestant or Eastern Orthodox. Could it be that Catholic theologians, for the most part, have felt no need to engage in this effort at reconciliation because they have assumed that this had long ago already been accomplished in Thomas Aquinas’ ‘grand synthesis’ of Christian and Aristotelian thought? I shall suggest later that, while Aquinas did, indeed, succeed in combining Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, he failed in what resulted to truly synthesize or integrate reason with faith, or revelation. My second observation, and a more important one in the present context, is that virtually every twentieth-century theologian I have mentioned, even though he aimed at demonstrating a relationship of essential compatibility between faith and reason, had also been impacted by the powerful theological writings of the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth – writings that consistently warned of the dangers of revelation being allied with, or shaped by, categories and concepts of secular reason – to the extent that each one of these theologians, virtually without exception, felt it important in the course of formulating their thinking, to take into serious account, even while rejecting, Barth’s contrary arguments.
It might seem that, in regard to the question of compatibility between faith and reason, the common characterization of modernity in terms of an assumed commitment to a less transcendent, more formal and empirical, and in that sense less religiously “inspired” understanding of human cognition, or reason, was being belied by the theologians, and even the philosophical figures, to whom I have alluded. But that would be to overlook the fact that there flows throughout the entire period, from the very earliest stirrings in the Enlightenment on, a forceful, and to some extent an even more influential current of thought, both secular and religious, that maintained either (1) that the integrity of reason could be maintained only by its complete detachment from revelation, or faith, or (2) that the integrity of faith was threatened by too much influence from reason, whether secular or religious. And it is this ‘separationist’ current, not the recurring and sometimes equally powerful ‘eddies’ that insist on an essential compatibility between faith and reason, that are, in the persistent forcefulness of their flow, new with the advent of modernity.

Among the modern philosophers who have most adamantly defended a secular Enlightenment understanding of reason and dismissed any role in reasoned discourse for faith (and, most emphatically, religious faith), we would have to include Descartes, Hume, Hobbes, Bentham, James & John Stuart Mill, and Nietzsche. That these are even more “household” names (at least in regard to college-educated households!) than most of those I have associated with the “eddies” of rapprochement, is perhaps a factor of the definitive role they have played in modernity. Their successors, the secular positivist thinkers of the twentieth century are too many to begin to name, and perhaps it is their sheer numbers, as well as and the axiomatic acceptance, at this point in the late-modern and early-post-modern period, of their perspective in academic environments that have made them, as individuals, less notable.

Although not among the positivists – indeed, a critic of them – Leo Strauss must be identified as one of the more notable twentieth-century secular philosophers representing an essentially separatist position in regard to faith and reason. Far more grounded than the vast majority of modern thinkers in his familiarity and commitment to classical principles of “natural right,” Strauss was critical of most modern philosophical thinking. But he agreed with the main current of modernity on the theme that I have identified as ‘separationist.’ He insisted that philosophy cannot refute revelation, nor revelation philosophy. In his view, there is an
unresolvable tension between what he referred to as the distinctive “codes” of philosophy and of religious faith. Still he insisted that it is a healthy tension. In Professor Strauss’s words:

No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian, nor for that matter some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.¹⁵

Strauss chose to be a philosopher, but one – unlike so many of his colleagues – “open to the challenge of theology.” One has to wonder: If the two realms of philosophy and religion are so irresolvably separated by their distinctive “codes,” or conceptual categories, how can either be in dialogue with the other in order to be able effectively to challenge the other? It appears to the present writer that Strauss was able to think he had accomplished this only by unwittingly translating many of the categories of the Judeo-Christian tradition into the categories of Platonic and Aristotelian thought, while still allowing that some others were untranslatable. At least in theory, Strauss was a separationist.

His contemporary, Karl Barth, writing as one of the major and most widely read theologians of the twentieth century, also must be included among the separatists. Rooted in his Calvinist commitment to the doctrine of universal sin, he had to conclude that because of the perversion of human perception and understanding brought about by the sinful derangement of the human soul, the unredeemed individual could not, on the basis of his own natural mental capabilities, hear God’s Word. Men and women in their sinful world depended essentially upon the miracle of God’s revelatory grace if they were not to continue in a secular universe of discourse completely separate and antithetical from that of God’s Kingdom. Indeed, Barth constantly warned that any effort to construct a philosophical theology (or a theologically inspired philosophy, for that matter) can only subvert the integrity of the Christian faith.

Many casual readers of Barth have, therefore, characterized his theology as both predestinarian and unequivocally separatist on the matter of faith and reason. However, as I have observed earlier (in endnote 14), Professor Clark is far from casual in his reading of Barth. He correctly perceives that, for Barth, the sinful human being is still provided with an
opportunity to participate in God’s attempt to reach out to him (which Clark sees as analogous to Polanyi’s assignment of an active role to man in his quest for truth). This is where Barth’s distinction between secular and religious reason comes into play. Since the latter kind of reason, according to Barth’s definition, is the thought, narrative, and symbolism (represented in Christian liturgy, doctrine, tradition, creed, and biblically-inspired theology) that emerges from the Church as the community of worship and reconciliation, it can be assumed to be, for the most part, compatible with – and, indeed, often expressive of – God’s revelation in Christ. And Barth also offers the caveat that even these expressions of the Church community as the ‘body of Christ’ must not be assumed to be perfect expressions of God’s Word in revelation, even in the Holy Scriptures. (Interestingly, this, despite Barth’s essentially conservative’ theology, makes his theology unacceptable to the scriptural literalists in the evangelical ‘right.’)

I have not done complete justice to the intricacies of Barth’s systematic theology, which in the course of thirteen volumes of *Church Dogmatics* (by his enumeration, only four, but still extending just short of two feet across my book shelf), in addition to other theological works he authored, allows him to make the case that there is, indeed, a compatible relationship and a constructive dialogue between theological and specifically “religious” reason. However, (something that I think Professor Clark has down-played in his focus on the similarities between Barth’s and Polanyi’s respective epistemologies) one must not ignore the fact that, by Barth’s own admission, secular reason (that segment of reason that, we must remind ourselves, constitutes by far the largest extent of reasoning, as we generally understand it), shaped as it is by the condition of man’s fallen nature and, unlike religious reason, unredeemed by divine revelation, remains outside the pale of any commonality that would permit a relationship of compatibility, let alone communication, between the two. The partial compatibility between the mundane world and the Kingdom of God, which are asserted in the formulations of Aristotelian and Thomistic thought, and therefore the possibility of drawing upon the secular categories of human reason to provide, by analogy, insights into the mind – or the revelatory Word – of God, simply does not exist in Barth’s theological cosmos. It is for this reason that I am not hesitant to characterize Karl Barth as a complete separatist in regard to the relationship he perceives to exist between secular reason and faith.

Because of conspicuous differences between the theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, it has seldom been noticed that Tillich relies upon the same conceptual device – that is,
the drawing of sharp distinctions between types of reason – to rescue human reason from complete irrelevance in regard to revelatory faith. Tillich makes a threefold distinction – among (1) “autonomous,” or formal, tautological, reason, grounded in principles of internal consistency; (2) “heteronomous” reason, a “specious” type of reasoning, since it is not grounded in any ultimately self-consistent set of principles; and (3) “theonomous” reason, or reasoning grounded in faith. For Tillich, theonomous reason is the most adequate kind of reasoning, because it is grounded in “Being itself,” the phrase he commonly used for “God.” Therefore, man with his capacity for theonomous reason is an important agent (for Polanyi, the judging, or ‘active center,’ that comprises the ‘personal’ pole of a ‘triadic’ structure of imaginative and integrative, ‘subsidiary → focal’ knowing), especially in regard to religious insights, or spiritual intuitions. (Three centuries earlier, Pascal, in distinguishing between two kinds of reason – formal, logical reason and intuition, believed that faith related more closely to the latter kind of reason.) But, unlike Polanyi, Tillich’s epistemological paradigm fails – like Barth’s – even to bring, or even to aspire to bring, the major portion of reason – secular reason (a vast part of which is, of course, scientific reasoning) into a coherent unity with faith. Consequently, as Scott and Moleski observe: “In Polanyi’s view, the theologians with whom he was familiar” [(Tillich and Barth were only two of these)]

had not yet developed a ‘reasonable’ theology. He criticized Tillich because he, like most modern theologians, attributed too much significance to the current scientific view of the world and therefore exaggerated the distinction between science and faith. For his part, Polanyi thought the structure of science was akin to that of religious faith ... [although] Polanyi did not want to go further than this in his comparison of science and religion.17

Those whom I have labeled the modern ‘separatists,’ even those who have allowed a small niche in the otherwise strict wall of separation between faith and reason for a certain kind of “religious reason” or “secular intuition” to permit a limited flow of discourse between the two, have not provided for the far more radical and extensive epistemological integration attempted by Michael Polanyi. Some have perceived C.P. Snow’s 1959 critique of the “two cultures” in Western society as a ray of hope for the bridging of this gap – not only between scientific reason and religion, but even more broadly between science and the humanities. His widely read Two Cultures18 describes well the separatist view that, as I have suggested, dominated much of
modernity down to the present time. Snow, like Polanyi, a prominent Oxbridge scientist-turned-humanist, and also like Polanyi, lamented what he perceived as an enormous and, indeed, growing gap between the physical sciences and the humanities, and further, again like Polanyi, feared that this gap posed a major threat to the very sense of a common culture. He proposed that scholars, for example in the field of literature, should become more informed about what their colleagues in the physics labs across the campus are doing, and vice versa. However, at the same time, he confessed that real understanding among these disparate disciplines was not substantially achievable, for each was destined to speak its own language as if the speakers inhabited totally alien cultures.

Since Professor Snow’s book appeared in several languages nearly half-a-century ago, my impression is that most people who became conversant with his thesis assumed that, although what he described was pretty much the way things are, still a concerted effort among practitioners of science and practitioners of any of the humanities to learn each other’s language would open the channels of communication. However, an important part of Snow’s assumption was that, not only do the practitioners of the different disciplines speak different languages, but that their respective language structures are so different from each other that they are not even translatable into each other. If effect, he was claiming that the epistemologies of science and of the humanities have virtually nothing in common. If this is indeed so, then we can hardly be led to any other conclusion than that we are destined to have to settle for increasingly highly fragmented and conflicted communities. However, persuaded by Polanyi’s thinking (it appears that Snow’s book, coming out a year after Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* [1958], had not been informed by the latter’s thinking, although a subsequent, expanded edition of *The Two Cultures* was issued in 1964), it will be my thesis that we need not accept the separationists’ argument that the divisions between such endeavors as science and faith (or, more generally, the humanities) run so deep as to be epistemic, or otherwise inherent in the different structures or modes of thought that characterize each.

III. Defining ‘Reason’ and ‘Faith’

At least, the leading figures in the modern debate over the relationship between reason and faith, regardless of which side they have taken – whether as secularists or religionists, as so-called separationists or integrationists – have participated for the most part in a responsible and
reasonable manner that has kept the discussion open, at least among these participants. It appears to me, however, that a major factor that has often kept this debate among responsible participants from progressing toward a constructive and agreeable conclusion has been a failure to come to a shared understanding of the meaning of the central terms of the debate – ‘reason’ and ‘faith,’ especially the latter. Therefore, I shall now turn to addressing this problem.

I have elsewhere surveyed the very long history of the etymologies of both ‘faith’ and ‘reason,’ starting near the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E., in what we know of the oral cultures existing at that time in Egypt, the Middle East, and Greece, both secular and religious. In this survey, I traced these concepts from the early oral into succeeding literate cultures, and finally down to the modern period. What I discovered was that both concepts were present in the earliest of these cultures and further that, through the course of their evolving meanings, different cultures at different times varied not only in their understandings of these two terms, but also in the relative importance they assigned to the one or the other.

I shall not present here the very long and fascinating history relating the varied conceptualizations of what we today variously refer to as “reason,” except to indicate that in the various cultures and times the meaning assigned to this term, although seldom unfraught with ambiguity, alternated, for the most part, between what today we would identify, on the one hand, as empirical or inductive reasoning and, on the other hand, analytic or deductive reasoning. Where the latter understanding prevailed, the ‘reasonable’ person was understood to be one who could formally and coherently, through essentially deductive processes of inference, organize his thoughts, making clear and fairly precise each stage of his thinking that led to his conclusions. ‘Rationalist’ philosophers, therefore, have usually presented as their ideal mode of thinking a model that begins with a foundation of clearly-defined axioms, or seemingly self-evident truths, and that proceeds by formal and clearly defined, seemingly self-evident rules of logic to equally clear and certain conclusions.

Those who challenge this precise and formal definition of reason generally demur by protesting that one cannot expect to grasp clearly the real world, the world ‘out there,’ so to speak, by imposing upon it a priori, or independently conceived, categories and abstract rules of logic. Instead, they argue, we must be open to the impressions we receive from this external world, as they present themselves to us, often in a less than logically coherent manner, to our
senses. These are the empiricists, those who pride themselves on looking at the physical world supposedly without preconceptions, by merely recording their ‘direct’ observations of that world, and only then proceeding inductively according to ‘unbiased’ rules no less precise than those advocated by the rationalists – thus advancing methodically with the intent of reaching conclusions in the form of generalizations, again no less clear and precise than the conclusions attained by their rationalist brethren.

It is one of the strange turns of history that, while modern science has established and defined itself solidly on the empirical model of reason, science from antiquity up to the modern period perceived itself as abstract and rationalist. (Even when Aristotle assigned an unprecedented role to empirical observation, it was assumed by him that these observations themselves had to be subjected to strict analytic and formal categories of interpretation and organization.) The ancient Greek term for formal, discursive thinking, dianoia, continued to be regarded throughout classical Greek society as clearly superior to mere sensory perception, or pistis – a term that, interestingly, was even further demoted in the rationalistic mind of the Greeks by becoming associated with what commonly today would be called ‘faith.’ Comparable to the Greek term dianoia, was the subsequent Latin term for abstract, deductive reasoning -- scientia, the very root from which we get our word ‘science.’ For a thousand years prior to the modern period, what we call science – that is, empirical, observation-based, and tangibly testable science – was not even regarded as ‘science,’ but was relegated to the domain of speculative ‘natural philosophy.’ This is not to say that even modern science has always claimed for itself an exclusively observational, or empirical model. Indeed, since the beginning of the twentieth century, at least since Einstein’s discovery of the Special Theory of Relativity in 1905, basic, or ‘pure,’ science has found that its advancement has depended increasingly upon the postulation of intangible forces, such as ‘invisible’ cosmic ‘black matter,’ and such ‘non-material,’ subatomic entities, as ‘quarks,’ ‘gluons,’ and unconceptualizable, even unimaginable, ten- or eleven-dimensional ‘strings,’ that elude direct observation. Therefore, the theories of both Relativity and Quantum Mechanics depend for both their expression and their ‘proof’ upon elaborate formal and mathematical equations that have, at best, only indirect and largely speculative bearing upon entities that offer themselves for direct empirical experience or reflection. When the proponents of these theories are asked what it is they find scientifically compelling about these abstract creations, often they can only point to their aesthetic beauty!
Physical scientists have struggled unsuccessfully for nearly a century now to reconcile the disparate findings of the two models of reason they have employed in their explorations. What I am saying is that the pictures of reality (or ontologies) that twentieth and twenty-first century science has presented to us – a tangible, material world that remains predictably obedient to Newtonian laws of physics and an intangible, subatomic world together with a larger trans-spatial and trans-temporal cosmos that completely defies those laws – are, as they stand, in fundamental contradiction to each other. Yet scientists generally agree that their tools, or methodologies, themselves – those of deductive reason and of empirical observation, and the larger philosophical systems (or epistemologies) that support these tools – are not themselves in conflict, and indeed are complementary. It is, rather, within the larger scope of human inquiry – where we deal not only with physical science but also with the humanities, not only with reason but also with faith – that we are confronted with conflicts not only in ontology, or among accepted understandings of what is real, but also, it appears, in epistemology, that is, on the even more fundamental (in the sense of prior) question of how we can know or decide what is real, in the sense of what is true.

Recently Dale Cannon called to my attention the profound insights of an Eastern Orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart,21 who depicts the greater depths of revelational faith as essentially aesthetic. ‘Explorers’ (to employ Polanyi’s very apt term) in the basic, or theoretical, sciences are in general agreement that their ways of discovery and knowing are ultimately best represented in the language of aesthetics. Hegel described “beauty [as] truth seen in sensuous form.”22 Theoretical science, we ought to say, perceives beauty as truth perceived through the intuitive and creative representations of the imagination. Drawing upon these aesthetic sensitivities, Hart has constructed a convincing bridge from the humanities – and, more specifically, religious faith – to science, just as Polanyi and his colleagues in basic science, including Einstein, have constructed a similar bridge from the other end, from science to the humanities. So what this suggests to me, as I struggle to find some comprehensive and commonly acceptable definition of reason, is that methodologically – while we are able to narrow down significantly an otherwise broad range of mental processes that at one time and place or another were regarded as reasonable, by eliminating such obviously untenable ‘methodologies’ as voodoo incantation, peyote-induced hallucination, and random impulse – we are left essentially with what we have defined as the processes of induction and deduction, as we have learned from Polanyi, importantly supplemented and supported by intuition and creative
imagination. Similarly, again as we have learned from Polanyi, these processes we have identified with reason, are at a more fundamental level, united by a common epistemology but, because it is the same epistemology that, we shall see, undergirds also faith, it does not enter into our definition of reason to the extent that it is still perceived, at the methodological level, to be distinct from faith. Polanyi underscores his perception of this methodological difference by his distinction between *verification* and *validation*.

As for coming to a commonly acceptable definition of *faith*, I suspect that most people today would say that this is the more vexing of the two terms, even before we attempt the further, and at least equally challenging, task of defining the relationship *between* faith and reason. However, to jump beyond the varying and, admittedly sometimes vexing, multiple historical understandings of this term, both in itself and in its relationship to reason, I can report that the most important thing to come out of this historical survey, once I restricted my focus – in keeping with the scope of this essay – to the specifically Hebrew and Christian understandings of ‘faith’ throughout this multi-millennial period, was finally a very compelling definition of ‘faith’. What I have to offer seems to me a thoroughly coherent and theologically sound threefold definition of the concept, which relates compatibly with the, also multi-dimensional, understanding of ‘reason’ I have just proposed, providing the three facets of faith that I am about to elaborate are kept in proper proportion with each other. I note, at this point, that because this proportionality, far too often, has *not* been maintained throughout the long history of Judaism and Christianity, with – as we shall note later – serious consequences for the integrity of the faith, it is hazardous to rely on much of the Church’s actual record of doctrine and example to define this standard of proper balance, or proportionality, among the facets of ‘faith.’ It is essentially by participation in a worshipping and morally responsive community of the faithful, and a careful study of the Church’s preaching and scriptural record, made meaningful by an attempt to discern, by an indwelling of these experiences and pronouncements -- what is true, or not true, to the engendering source of the very existence of the Church, namely the life and teachings of Jesus, that I can identify what I find to be a reliable standard to define what I have come to understand to be the proper proportions of faith.

The threefold definition of faith that I shall therefore rely on is one that understands ‘faith,’ and in particular ‘religious faith,’ to mean (1), first of all, faith-as-trust, or faith as the exercise of the will to commit, or entrust, oneself. Some have spoken of this as ‘faith-in’
because trust must always refer to an ‘object’ of trust. Most appropriately this ‘object’ is a person, or a God who, in some sense, is most appropriately referred to in terms of ‘personhood’. I do not accept the objection that, in metaphorically attributing personhood to God, we thereby ‘reduce’ God to the finite dimensions of human personhood. To the contrary, I suggest that, in searching for a term that, within the limitations of our very creaturely and finite existence and that comes closest to doing justice to the divine Being known primarily for His unceasing desire for union with His creatures, (and One, not improperly, treated by Judaism as too holy to be named), such a Being is clearly not even remotely ‘captured’ in terms of impersonal objectivity: one thinks, for example, of ‘the Force,’ the appellation given to the divine Being in the film *Star Wars*. Further, I suggest that, if we are to articulate any reference to God’s attributes that goes beyond the mere negation of *via negativa*, we can do no better – however inadequate the term – than the metaphor of ‘person.’ The idea here is that when we speak of God as ‘Person,’ we are simply using the loftiest concept we know from our finite world of experience in order to suggest that certainly God is this much, yet still more. Although this linguistic procedure would be termed *via eminentiae* by Thomas Aquinas, it had already been employed as a matter of course by the earliest Christian communities and, indeed, by Jesus himself as he referred to his Heavenly Father. And so, in recognizing the ineffably transcendent nature of God, we are able to move beyond mere silence, to assertions that, because their open metaphorical boundaries expand inferentially beyond the limits of our categorical literalism (i.e., precisely because “we know more than we can say”), invoke an element of trust in what might be entailed in the “yet still more.” If one has not experienced the Divine and deeply personal initiative that calls for such trust, then such recourse to personal attribute can hardly seem ‘reasonable.’ (I am reminded of a story told about an encounter of the great nineteenth-century preacher Phillips Brooks with student from Harvard University, who had stopped by his office. In the course of their conversation, the student declared to the Reverend Brooks, “I find totally unacceptable any reference to God as “Person.” To which the preacher is said to have simply replied, “In other words, you don’t think that thought could have occurred to God?”) This inherently personal, because trusting, dimension of faith is fundamental in my triadic definition of faith precisely because – particularly in the Judeo-Christian tradition – a large part of the ‘object’ of faith, God, although ‘revealed’ (indeed, revealed as personal), at the same time remains ‘hidden,’ as viewed “in a glass darkly.” (I Cor. 13:12, *KJV*) However, our consideration of the fiducial dimension of faith has already brought us into the next dimension.
(2) The second dimension of faith that emerges from the history of the Church as it seems to have been true to Jesus’ own understanding of faith is faith-as-belief, the more cognitive aspect of faith. Some have referred to this as ‘faith-that’, because even trust, as placed in such an ‘object’ as, for example, a merely human person, inevitably assumes – if it is a responsible and coherent form of faith – some cognitive content, or something about, that person – this is, if it is not what we properly term ‘blind belief,’ and therefore based upon ‘blind trust.’ There are some things about even a ‘hidden’ God that we must be able to know, or believe, beyond His/Her sheer hiddenness, if our faith-as-trust is to have some content to which we can relate and respond, that is, if this faith is to be meaningful, and if, therefore, it is to be a sound and responsible faith. It is important to point out that, particularly within the Christian faith, the knowledge, or the dimension of faith that came to be designated as ‘belief’, is by no means limited to information, or propositions, or even strictly cognitive experience. This other type of knowledge – clearly recognized by Michael Polanyi as the kind we are more likely to acquire by ‘apprenticeship’ than by expository instruction – has sometimes been referred to as ‘knowledge by acquaintance,’ to distinguish it from merely conceptual knowledge. John Baillie seems to have ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ in mind, and he gives it theological application when he says, “In the last resort [revelation] is not information about God that is revealed, but very God Himself . . . His offering of Himself in fellowship.” Or, more to the point, we might say that it is a revealing of the depth of love that is at the very heart of the God’s creative act itself, and which we have had the opportunity to witness – as well as to witness to – as it was revealed in the person of Jesus. In the next section of this essay, we shall view the consequences of ‘imbalance’ among the three dimensions of faith. From what I have just said, it becomes apparent that a deficiency in regard to the dimension we have called ‘belief’ need not take the form of merely a failure of intellectual grasp, but it can also manifest itself as a more ‘qualitative’ deficiency – an existential superficiality, or lack of depth, in regard to belief. In fact, Professor Baillie tells us that this move of religious belief and affirmation from a sense of relation and response to a living God toward the embrace of a relatively lifeless orthodoxy of creed and doctrine “can already be detected in . . .the insistence of the Rabbis [in the period leading up to, and including, the time of Jesus] that the Old Testament law and prophets represented the ipsissima verba [the essence of the word] of God.” And Baillie goes on to say that “very early in the history of the Church . . .the same principle was extended to the Gospels and the Epistles.”
The third dimension of faith, appearing for the first time in ancient Judaism as a perhaps the dominant feature, as far as we know, of a religion, is better expressed by the word ‘faithfulness’ – that is, a moral response to the God who is trusted and about Whom certain things can be known. I recently discovered that John Baillie had made the same three-fold observation about the nature of faith, and in regard to this third facet, Professor Baillie often uses such terms as ‘obedience,’ ‘responsibility,’ ‘trustworthiness,’ and ‘reliability’ on behalf of the person of faith. Because, in the Jewish tradition the relationship between the Creator and the human creature is seen to be, above all else, a *covenant* relationship, God is also characterized as ‘reliable’ and ‘trustworthy’ – although not properly as ‘obedient’ since (despite the fact that covenants or contracts generally connote a relationship of mutual obligations and benefits) a covenant with God represents, by definition, an asymmetrical relationship. In ancient Judaism, the same word, *aman*, referred to both ‘truth’ and ‘dependability’ – i.e., the central truth of what had been historically revealed as the relation between God and man was the reliability of God and, of course, man’s moral responsibility to be similarly reliable, or dependable. Klaus Koch makes the revealing observation that “the opposite of *aman*, to the Hebrew mind, is not falsehood but *schaqar*, that is, undependability.” Although the divine attribute of reliability, or trustworthiness, in Christianity is generally considered to be an essential *precondition* of faith-as-trust and an imperative *outcome* of faith-as-belief, it is not – at least by definition – *integral* to these. Therefore, within Christianity the concepts of faith and faithfulness are treated terminologically separately as these different words in the English language indicate by their generally assumed separate connotations, although they tend to be combined terminologically in one Hebrew word, *emeth*, or alternatively, *aman* (or its related verb form, *amat*). However, the linguistic difference is not ultimately significant since, in both the Jewish and the Christian tradition it is understood that there can be no spiritual integrity in either faith-as-trust or faith-as-belief if moral obedience is not the outcome of faith, or more fundamentally, if faith & belief do not effect a real transformation in the so-called person of faith, that is, if it is not evident in that person’s behavior that a real change has occurred. Concerned about currents within present-day Christianity that have come to define faith as, first and last, belief, Marcus Borg recalls Christians to what I have described as its essentially Jewish roots when he reminds us that the Christian life is a way of being Christian in which beliefs are secondary, not primary. Christianity is a ‘way’ to be followed more than it is about a set of beliefs to be believed.
IV. Christianity: A History of Imbalance Among the Elements of Faith

It has been observed in recent decades that many societies – most conspicuously European society – have experienced a massive rejection of faith, in particular the traditional forms of Christianity, and have turned toward secularism. But it has simultaneously been noted that fundamentalism – Christian, Muslim, etc. – has been on the ascendancy throughout much of the world, sometimes in the same societies rejecting the ‘mainline’ expressions of faith. The two trends should not be regarded as separate. It appears to me that in numerous instances, often in our own society, the turn from Christianity to secularism should not be perceived as a rejection of Christianity as it has been conveyed by the Church through generations of its inspired martyrs and faithful witnesses, but instead as a – not unreasonable – rejection of the highly distorted image of the faith as it has come to be represented in many pulpits and in the popular media. What many have come to know as the “Christian faith” – whether in their rejection of it or in their embrace of it – represents far too often a travesty of the faith.

Faith in each of its three dimensions can easily become such a travesty, especially when not in proper balance with the other two dimensions. (1) When lacking obedient action, it becomes not only an effete, “armchair” faith, but one that inevitably reflects something aberrant or lacking in one or the other of its dimensions. (2) When lacking in trust, it is often a result of failing to acknowledge the ultimate and inevitable mystery of God’s ways, and it therefore compensates by a kind of positivistic embrace of the literal and the tangible – a hubristic ‘all-knowing’ and often judgmental ‘taking charge’ where it is feared that God is not ‘in control.’ (3) When lacking in responsible belief and affirmation, both belief and trust become ‘blind,” and this neglect, to the extent that it relates to the cognitive aspects of belief (although, as we have just observed, belief involves much more than this) is likely rooted in an unstated assumption that only one’s will is truly God-given, not one’s mind or intellect. Then, not only honest doubt but theology itself comes to be perceived as the enemy of faith. So we can see that the imbalance and distortions that emerge from an ‘imbalance’ of either trust or belief tend to converge in the travesties they come to embody. In all three instances, what we are left with is essentially a lack of spiritual integrity. I think of the storied, but far too likely, interchange that is initiated when the priest asks his catechism class, “What is faith?” and Johnny’s immediate response is “I know what faith is. Faith is believing what you know isn’t true!” What is
revealed here is not only the travesty of credulity (i.e., believing what one is not convinced is true), but outright dishonesty (affirming what one suspects, or even knows, is not true).29

Such travesties of faith are sadly not confined to the young initiate. One might understandably assume that the scholarly members of seminary faculties would be the least likely to “cut corners” in representing their religious beliefs to their students, the future clergy, whose tasks will be to represent, in turn, their beliefs to their congregations or to the students in their college chaplaincies. Therefore, it comes as something of a jolt to learn that the eminent Harvard Divinity School theologian, Professor Paul Tillich is reported to have confessed to theologically-ambivalent Michael Polanyi, “You really say what I am thinking about religion. I have to inform people who are going to be ministers of what they can say in their churches and can’t be completely frank about everything.”30

It has been my impression that such a well-intended, although paternalistic, dissimulation of the faith as Tillich appeared to be approving here is quite frequent within theological faculties. What sets Professor Tillich off from the others is his candor – his honesty – in confessing his occasional recourse to and justification of dishonesty. So, we should perhaps not be surprised when the pastors who have sat at the feet of these theological icons have themselves picked up something of their teachers’ ethic of dissimulation, or pious hypocrisy, or whatever we may – perhaps more euphemistically – wish to call it. Still, we must strongly reject any suggestion that there can be allowed within Christianity one set of beliefs for the intellectuals and another for the less philosophically or theologically sophisticated. Once that view is accepted, ironically, it forces the ‘intellectuals’ to identify as their source of inspiration and authority someone other than Jesus of Nazareth – for he claimed to be neither particularly intellectual nor sophisticated, but only faithful, in the fullest, most responsible, and most radical sense of that term.

We laugh when we hear the homiletic anecdote of the minister who was said to write occasionally in the margins of his sermon the prompt – “I’m not really sure about this, so speak loudly and pound fist.” Religious dishonesty takes many and often far more subtle forms. Preachers often have the feeling that the sermon they are preaching is really a stem-winder. But finding that it is not really having that effect, they realize that perhaps they have subjected what, in fact, started as a truly prophetic statement to too many modifications and redrafts because of their uneasiness over offending people.
Indeed, it is often congregations themselves that encourage such disingenuousness. The mere wearing of a ministerial robe or clerical collar tends to relax, in many people’s minds, their standards for holding their clergy accountable. While serving as the pastor of a congregation many years ago, I sometimes experienced considerable frustration in trying to convey the sincerity of my heartfelt and deeply reflected convictions from the ‘protective zone’ of the church, the pulpit, and my ministerial robe. Congregants would occasionally say to me – what, I suspect, many people thought but did not articulate – “I’m sure you must believe that since you are a minister,” as the obverse of their considering that perhaps I had become a minister because I believed that. I constantly found that people took me far more seriously when I tried to articulate my faith outside of my official garb and church venue, unidentifiable in terms of my profession. This played a part in my decision to take up a lay ministry, as a professor of Political Science. (I’ve not yet had anyone comment to me: “You say that because you are a professor!”)

It is not my intention to excuse, and certainly not to endorse, the frequent distortions of faith represented in acts of spiritual credulity or dishonesty when I suggest that the pressures and the temptations for engaging in dissemblance and hypocrisy – even deliberate dishonesty – are probably greater in the religious profession than in any other. (Perhaps some enterprising sociologist should do a comparative study, in this regard, of clergy and used-car – excuse me: ‘previously owned’ – car salespersons [the revised terminology, of course, cleverly crafted on the chance that we might be persuaded that the previous owner had never ‘used’ his car!].) After all, clergy generally would not be in the clergy if they were not well-intending people, not wanting to offend. But a far more fundamental temptation that begs for self-censure and compromise is experienced by all adherents to the faith, both clergy and laity. Eric Voegelin perceived this in what he described as the inherent fragility of faith. He recognized the inevitable “hiddenness,” and therefore uncertainty at the center of the Christian faith, and he points to “the tenuous bond of faith,” acknowledged in Hebrews 11:1, which speaks of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” (NRSV) So, Professor Voegelin observes:

The bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss – the very
Elsewhere, Voegelin speaks of the constant temptation within Christianity to move “from uncertain truth to certain untruth.” In Polanyian terminology, we could rephrase this as what Polanyi perceives as the characteristically modern compulsion to move from the profound truths of elusive and tacitly based intimations to the illusory but reassuring clarities of unambiguously explicit conclusions derived according to equally clear and certain rules of logic.

Of course, in the context of specifically religious faith, the pressures to embrace simple but false answers receive their impetus from more than the universal desire for intellectual resolution. The most powerful forces at work in Christianity are those that propose to satisfy the even more basic and universal desire for salvation. And the most common desire that has recurringly ‘worked’ to provide easy but illusory answers to those made gullible in their unreflective existential anxiety and desperation has been an unquestioning and simplistic affirmation of what Voegelin refers to as ‘gnostic’ creedal propositions, and what we have identified in terms of faith as mere belief, unchecked by any uncertainties, by any aura of mystery that could call for genuine trust. Obviously, when faith is framed in the context of a doctrine that ties ultimate salvation, one’s eternal destiny, to an unquestioned and supposedly unquestionable belief or belief system, faith – thus understood – is far removed from any likelihood of reasoned or probing reflection, and indeed manipulation, even coercion, begin to appear acceptable for the purpose of propagating such faith. Incidentally, at this point we find that the lines between religious and secular expressions of faith become blurred. Even such atheistic doctrines of faith as classical Marxism and the most materialistic, consumption-driven doctrines of capitalism have commonly taken on quasi-religious dimensions of ultimacy and fervor. Michael Polanyi has referred to this phenomenon as a kind of “moral inversion.”

Add to the simple misunderstanding of the nature of faith the intrinsically tenuous nature of faith even when properly understood in regard to the extraordinary demands for courage it places upon the faithful, and – further – add to these the strong passions of self-righteous ‘certainty’ encouraged by manipulative, self-serving, and sometimes even well-motivated preachers, and we can see why one’s faith ranks up with sex and politics as topics not to be brought up in polite company.
V. Christianity: A History of Imbalance Between Faith and Reason

In the course of examining the nature of religious faith, I have spoken of the importance of ‘proper balance’ among faith’s three dimensions: belief, trust, and obedient, or moral, response. And in focusing specifically on the component of belief, we have recognized the importance of reasonable belief. If faith is to be a proper or responsible kind of faith, the beliefs associated with it must be reasonable beliefs, beliefs that meet the standards of intellectual integrity. So, as we expand our inquiry to embrace the larger theme of this essay – the relation between faith (considered in its entirety) and reason, we note that we have already concluded that there must be a certain relevance, or compatibility, between reason and at least that constituent of faith we have designated as belief. However, we have not yet addressed the larger question of the relation between, on the one hand, faith, including not only the element of belief, but also what we usually assume to be its truly fiducial constituent, that of trust, and, on the other hand, reason, the latter including not only what some have called ‘religious reason,’ but reason as we have broadly defined it to include also secular reason.

The history of Christianity can certainly be accurately portrayed in terms of a history of numerous outstanding instances, periods, and individual examples of spiritual integrity, and of faithful witness to Him who it claims corporatively to embody. But we are also aware that this history has been equally marked by serious failures of the Church to be faithful to its high calling. We have already suggested some instances where this failure can be described in terms of what I have called imbalances within faith, that is, among the three dimensions of faith. At exactly what point an imbalance between, for instance, trust and belief, becomes more than theologically questionable and constitutes an actual betrayal of its witness cannot be precisely defined and remains a legitimate subject of theological debate. The same observation can be made in regard to broader question of what constitutes a spiritually healthy and responsible balance between reason and faith. There is no clear, hard and fixed formula of this sort. Indeed, different Christian traditions have reasonably and faithfully varied as they have assigned different degrees of importance and legitimacy, for example, to ‘high’ liturgical form or ‘low’ liturgical form, to guidance by detailed doctrine or by the illumination of an ‘inner light,’’ to greater or lesser degrees of reliance on scriptural or apostolic authority, etc. But my reading of Church history indicates that there have also been numerous occasions where the imbalance
between faith and reason have been serious enough to call into question the integrity of the Church’s witness.

To illustrate the vicissitudes of this imbalance, both within the three dimensions of faith and between faith and reason, in both its more extreme and less extreme expressions from the emergence through the subsequent history of Christianity, let us start with Christianity’s Hebrew roots. By the time the Hebrew scriptures, in the form of what is now referred to as the Old Testament, were given their final canonical endorsement near the end of the 1st century A.D. “Faith,” for the Jews, had primarily a moral (in contrast to what we have called faith-as-belief or faith-as-trust) connotation. It referred, first and foremost, to the relationship of trustworthiness and fidelity between God and man, and obedience on the part of man. Whereas, it was assumed that it was God’s trust in man that required man’s obedience, it was primarily man’s obligation to be trustworthy. As a result of the scriptural canonization, this sense of obedient faithfulness acquired the character of obedience to the scriptural Law. Therefore, faithfulness for the Jews was, according to Gerhard Friedrich, “no longer in a strict sense faithfulness to the experienced acts of God in history with trust in his future acts therein.”

We noted earlier that the Hebrew faith was primarily future-oriented because of its understanding of faith as essentially a covenantal and mutual relation of dependability, itself implicitly future-oriented. However, even before the final canonization of Hebrew scripture there were trends toward legalism and an increasing embodiment of the Hebrew faith as a religion ‘of the book.’ Therefore, “faith” understood simply as trust in God came to play an increasingly diminished role in rabbinical Judaism, and it would not be restored to prominence until the emergence, from Judaism, of Christianity. Gerhard Barth observes that

one can …ascertain in the majority of New Testament traditions and writings a usage [of the term “faith” (pistis)] clearly distinguishing itself from that of the Old Testament and Jewish environment . . . . Only in the New Testament did “faith” first become the central and comprehensive designation for one’s relationship to God . . . .

The Gospel accounts, as well as the testimony of the Apostle Paul, in the New Testament make it clear that, partly due to the influence of the Pharisees, by the beginning of the Christian era a rigidly interpreted code of legal conformity had been substituted for what a growing group of
Jewish dissidents, led by Jesus of Nazareth, identified as the inherent uncertainties and risks of a living, or lived, faith – and, therefore, the need for an understanding of faith centered on trust.

Therefore, in regard to faith, one of the first things that we notice is that at the outset of Christianity, faith was understood, first and foremost, in the sense of a faith in . . . – that is, what we have been calling “faith-as-trust” – instead of a faith that . . . – what we have been calling “faith-as-belief.” Jesus defined his faith and commitment as a faith in God and a commitment to promoting the coming of His Kingdom. He called upon those who would follow him to embody a similar faith, or trust, and a similar commitment. It was in terms of this kind of active and dynamically lived faith that Jesus distinguished between those who were with him and those who were against him.

This is quite different from the style of a religious leader – of whom we see many today – who urges his/her fellowmen to have faith-as-belief in a certain theological formulation or definition of orthodoxy, and who uses this test of affirmation, or belief, to distinguish the “faithful” from the “unfaithful.” This is not to say that trusting, or having faith in . . . doesn’t entail certain beliefs, or that religions can operate faithfully without doctrines. If one has well-founded faith in a person, it is not unreasonable to have trust-as-belief in what that person says. What a person says certainly constitutes much of what a person is (assuming, of course, it is consistent with what that person does). This does not preclude further consideration and testing of such statements, or even a subsequent formulation of them as doctrine. Jesus is reported to have greatly respected the religious authorities who instructed him as a boy; but the reports suggest also that he demonstrated considerable learning and knowledge of his own, products of his own intense indwelling in moments of meditation, prayer, and inspired reflection, which he drew upon repeatedly, as both boy and man, as he held interlocutors of all sorts to reasoned and faithful account.

Christianity represents a lived indwelling of certain awarenesses and not a mere affirmation of certain facts or truths. The facts and affirmations must be seen as secondary to, in the sense of being derivative from, a prior indwelling, or trusting embracing of these awarenesses. Lest this be seen as an advocacy of blind belief when it comes to an ensuing and appropriate religious affirmation, let me remind you of the tacit dimension of knowledge that we alluded to earlier, as we brought into our discussion an insight from Michael Polanyi. I am
referring to his idea that, as one tries to grasp the “larger picture,” certain tacit awarenesses will always be fundamental to this picture that allow us to sense its coherence and its wholeness. Our awareness of these elements will depend upon our being open to “tacit intimations,” “things” that we can know but that we can no more adequately, or completely, say than we can completely see. Again, this of course culminates in the profound Pauline formulation of faith as trusting belief, or should we say “believing trust”: “For now we only see through a glass darkly . . .” (I Cor. 13:12, KJV), but we do see, and this calls for, even as it presupposes, a trusting commitment. It is noteworthy here, in the context of our larger inquiry, that we are speaking here as much about reason as we are about faith.

In the Christian context of understanding, to draw upon further Scriptural metaphor, the kind of assurance and certainty that is required for making the kind of life and death decisions of faith that a Christian is called upon to make, as the disciple Thomas learned, must rest upon something far more mysteriously encompassing and fundamental than our being able to place our hands into the bodily and physical wound of a crucified leader. Again, to be sure, the structure of faith includes an element of cognitive recognition and knowledge. However, in the words of the theologian Gerhard Barth, “knowledge is not a more advanced stage than faith, but is rather itself a structural element of faith.”

Barth also makes the observation that in the New Testament Book of Hebrews, “Jesus never appears as the object of faith. [He is presented] rather as the author and perfecter of faith,” in the sense that he offers – as we have already noted – a deeper and radically new understanding of faith (or pistis – a Greek work that took on dramatically deeper meaning in the Christian world) than had been available in the more than one thousand years that that concept had already been in currency.

Still, Jesus did not attempt to articulate a doctrine or theology of faith. Although Paul – the first of the canonical writers to articulate, a generation after Jesus’ death, a portrayal of the new faith – lapsed occasionally into what could well be described two thousand years later as formulaic doctrine, What to him made belief genuine, indeed salvific, was not an act of intellectual assent, however well-reflected-upon and sincerely embraced, but its ability to transform lives. The mere words of faith had to be first, themselves, transformed in their conceptualization and formulation by a deeper, inarticulate content of faith if these words were to transform others. (One cannot help but see this dynamic of truth and meaning in Polanyi’s portrayal of the tacit dimension of knowing.) And this deeper ‘content’ was what Jesus and Paul
knew simply as compassion – as profound ‘kenotic’, or ‘self-emptying’ love – first expressed in God’s act of creation and further revealed in the person and life of Jesus . . . offered, within the context of the Christian faith as a paradigm for those who would follow (Polanyi might add, ‘in apprenticeship’) as disciples.

The real test of our understanding of the Christian meaning of faith-as-trust, I think, confronts us when we experience bereavement, pain, and devastation in our lives, and when we then have to deal with the most difficult of religious questions (what theologians call “theodicy”), namely: How can a good God allow the most terrible thing to happen to us? – and we can find no adequate answer. Faith-as-trust then reveals its greatest depth of intimation and understanding by the assurance that, for whatever may be God’s reasons for not telling us, there is an answer – and that, whatever that answer may be, it is consistent with His everlasting love and mercy. For this reason, all the terrible things that may – and shall continue to – happen to us, they are never “tragic.” “Tragedy” was a pagan, Greek term. There is no such thing within the Christian faith as tragedy – for, through faith, we know (in the words of the Apostle Paul) that, “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.” (Romans, 8:28 TNIV)

However, as both Judaism and Christianity moved into a more aggressively evangelistic and propagandizing mode in the latter part of the first century A.D., faith came to be understood increasingly in terms of the apprehension of certain eternal and divine truths which made a claim for belief. We have already observed that a shift in Judaism from a future-oriented trust to a more static and legalistic system of belief had already occurred. Harvey Cox, drawing from Klaus Koch, goes on to note that

the contrast between the Hebrew notion of truth and the Greek one becomes particularly vivid as Christian faith moves from its Palestinian beginnings into the Greco-Roman world of the Mediterranean basin. Truth, which for the first Christians had meant conformity with what God would bring to pass for man, now began to mean the quality of a proposition that comported with the present structure of being. Koch believes that this transmutation of the Hebrew notion of truth really perverted it and transformed Christian faith into a kind of theistic metaphysic. . . .
I would suggest, however, that the shift in the Christian understanding of faith from trust toward an emphasis on belief was not so much prompted by corrupting trends in Judaism as much as it was prompted, in large part, by the innumerable mystical, Gnostic, and other belief systems that sprang up at the outset of the Christian era to contend with the Christian teachings—many of them, indeed, claiming to be authentic Christian doctrine based on the actual teachings of Jesus. When it became evident that creedal propositions, more than the expressions of a lived faith, were in contention, the concern of church and temple leaders turned to orthodoxy—a very revealing concept in itself, since the Greek word, literally translated, means “right belief.” It was out of this climate that the Roman church came to assert its authority, including its right to define, through councilliar and papal pronouncement, what distinguished acceptable belief from heresy. This brought to the fore the important question of the extent to which faith-as-mere-belief should be tested by reason or—the reverse—reason by faith-as-mere-belief.

Probably no thinker in the entire history of Christianity has attempted to construct a more elaborate theological system in order to define a cooperative relation between reason and faith than has Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274 A.D.) Informed greatly by Aristotle, he proposed no less than a grand synthesis between the philosophical principles of this great Greek thinker and the articulated doctrines of Roman Catholicism. This eventuated—as we saw in Aristotle—in an intricate hierarchical ordering of all levels of both being and knowing. In his hierarchy of knowing, reason is able on its own to explain all of the levels of the natural order, from elementary matter to the most developed of life forms, in a manner totally consistent with, but completely independent of, faith. However, as we move up the hierarchy of being and arrive at the supernatural order—which includes God, His angelic entourage, and His miraculous acts of intervention—reason must yield to revelation, or faith-as-belief, which then finds its expression independently of reason.

Thomas claims that his elaborate system demonstrates the compatibility of the structure of reason and faith (or, in his terms, rationality and revelation) and a continuity of function in the relationship between the two because each recognizes the autonomy of the other in its proper sphere. However, I would argue that, while he may well have achieved a unified understanding of the hierarchy of being (that is, an ontology characterized by continuity throughout), this was not achieved in his epistemology in as much as it does not represent a similar continuum or commonality in the structure of knowing between faith and reason. The “compatibility” that
Thomas claims, it appears to me, amounts to little more than a cooperative relationship between incompatibles. His system does represent a cooperative “synthesis” between the two faculties, in a sense, but a synthesis that can be maintained only by maintaining a sharp demarcation between the two.

This cooperative-but-autonomous relationship between faith and reason was clearly articulated in the middle of the nineteenth century by Cardinal John Henry Newman, who asserted that

Faith [is made] cognizable, and its acts . . . justified by Reason, without therefore being . . . dependent upon it . . . so Reason . . . put[s] its sanction upon the acts of Faith, without in consequence being the source from which Faith springs.  

In keeping with its Aristotelian grounding, Thomistic faith gives particular prominence to the belief dimension of faith, and belief is understood largely in terms of intellectual assent to a body of doctrine, that doctrine having its authority by its having been dictated to the Church by the Holy Spirit (Spiritu sancto dictante). In the sixteenth century, the Roman Church at the Council of Trent officially pronounced that the content of faith, by virtue of the dictation of the Holy Spirit, must be understood to include not only all of Scripture but also an extensive body of unwritten tradition. Indeed, from very early in the history of the Church, Professor Baillie informs us, divine revelation had already been equated with a body of information being in part about God Himself, but including also very much that could not be thus described, even [including] such historical facts as the dates of accession of the kings of Israel and Judah, and the genealogy of Joseph, the husband of Mary.

To be sure, Catholic theologians would insist that unwilling affirmation did not constitute an expression of faith. Assent, or conviction, must be motivated by a “good will to believe.” Thus the Catholic Encyclopedia defines faith as “an act of understanding, whereby we firmly hold as true whatever God has revealed.” However, implied in this is that the will is to be considered “good” only to the extent that it “moves the intellect to assent.” To suggest that any error could occur in the authoritative and expanding body of beliefs inspired by the Holy Spirit
was pronounced by Pope Leo XIII in 1893, in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, as no less than accusing God Himself as wrong, and therefore deficient in faith:

So far is it from being possible than any error can co-exist with divine inspiration that not only does the latter in itself exclude all error, but excludes and rejects it with the same necessity as attaches to the impossibility that God Himself, who is supreme Truth, should be the author of any error whatsoever.\(^{41}\)

The equating of faith with belief, of course, entails the equating of apostasy and heresy with disbelief, and this was clearly spelled out in 1934 in Cardinal Gasparri’s *The Catholic Catechism*: “Faith is lost by apostasy or heresy – when, that is, a baptized person repudiates all of some of the truths of faith, or deliberately calls them into question.”\(^{42}\) Dr. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, writing at about the same time, perceived the violence that had been wrought by the imbalance that had come about in the understanding of faith – not only in Catholicism but also in his Anglican confession and, indeed, throughout much of Christianity, when he wrote:

Under the influence of that exaggerated intellectualism which Christian theology inherited from Greek philosophy, a theory of revelation has usually been accepted in the Christian Church which fits very ill with the actual revelation treasured by the Church . . . [the idea] that through revelation we receive divinely guaranteed Truths.\(^{43}\)

Thomas Aquinas, it must be acknowledged, contributed to Christianity a most impressive theological architecture that highlights an essential continuity in the hierarchy of Being – similar in many respects to Polanyi’s – between man and his Creator. Aquinas argues that human reason, so far as it goes, and even empirical sensations, point the way to the truths of revelation, much as the visible beauty of nature suggests a Creator of supreme beauty, or the highest expressions of human love point toward a perfectly loving God. What theologians have termed *analogia entis*, or literally “an analogy to things,” provides us with a means of imagining, although imperfectly, from our experiences in this mundane world, something of the character of divine actions and entities. For instance, we are able to speak limitedly, although meaningfully, of God as “Father”
to the extent that we have experienced human fatherhood. But, as one examines the details of his grand scheme of knowing and revelatory faith, there appears to be no capacity for human knowing to play a role in the actual operations of faith, which he understands primarily as belief; nor is there a capacity for faith to play a role in the actual exercise of reason. Although there is in his scheme the element of faith-as-trust, or confidence (*fiducia*), in the latter’s embrace of divine authority, this fiducial element is no more than an act anterior to faith-as-belief. Therefore, Van A. Harvey tells us,

> Roman Catholicism [introduces] the idea of “implicit faith” (*fides implicita*) that represents a readiness on the part of the intellectually unsophisticated or ignorant to [give] assent to supernatural truths [of revelation] on authority even though those truths are not known or understood.”

The danger that inheres in any such formulation of faith, of course, is that, once salvation is made to be contingent on faith-as-belief (an assumption that would be challenged by the Protestant Reformation), if the saved are not then to consist of only the intellectual elite, one has to “dumb-down” belief to the most superficial and cursory kind of assent. “Faith” then becomes essentially what we have called ‘blind faith’ – often, at best, an empty and formulaic articulation of uncomprehended doctrine and, at worst, a strange mix of Christianity and native superstition – in either case, a heterodox religiosity that not only the Roman Catholic church but also Protestant fundamentalism has too often accepted from its clergy and laity, especially in third-world and undereducated populations. Obviously, in such instances, the supposed synthesis between reason and faith, in any meaningful sense, turns out to be illusory . . . and faith itself, no less than reason, fraudulent.

I fear that, as a Protestant, I may be perceived as targeting Catholicism in my theological and historical critique. However, neither my appreciation for my Catholic brethren nor the facts of history permit this. Whatever good intentions the Protestant Reformers – Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Wesley, etc. – had in righting the severe imbalance that had come about in the relationship between faith and reason and among the constituents of faith itself, it would be only a matter of time – indeed, very short time – before serious, although largely dissimilar, derailments and imbalances would come to characterize some of the sects into which Protestantism immediately fragmented, and into which it continues to fragment. In the case of
Protestantism, the imbalances took the form of exaggerated roles assigned to trust over articulate belief, of faith over reflective reason. (Still, from within some of the Protestant sects not thus afflicted, some of the most profound theology in the entire history of the Church has issued.) I shall focus upon some of these major, typically Protestant (but not limited to Protestantism), imbalances in the understanding of faith when I take up the phenomenon of fundamentalism.

Early in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther (1483-1546) objected to both the truncation of faith, when ungirded by reason, to mere blind assent, and to the loss of a personal sense of trust in the human/divine relationship, as institutional authority became increasingly reliant upon officially sanctioned belief. Central to his and to the other Reformers’ intent was the restoration of faith-as-trust. They claimed both authorization and guidance for their radical protestations in their reading of the Synoptic Gospels and the letter of Paul. Again, Professor Baillie offers insight on this. To be sure, he admits, we can find

a very great intellectualizing of the conception of faith . . . in the New Testament. It is true that in the later strata of New Testament thought, in the Pastoral and General Epistles, and perhaps also in the Johannine writing, we can already trace the beginnings of an increased emphasis upon the element of assent. But both the Synoptic Gospels and the letters of St. Paul read very differently. On our Lord’s own lips the word faith means primarily trust – trust in God and reliance upon His promises. To the disciples who trembled in the storm He said, “Why are you thus afraid? How is it that you have no faith? (Mark 4:40) To Jarius, when tidings had been brought him of his daughter’s death, He said, “Do not fear; only have faith.” (Mark 5:36) And to the father of the epileptic boy, “All things are possible for one who has faith.” (Mark 9:23) As for St. Paul, Dr. C. H. Dodd sums up a careful treatment by saying that “for Paul faith is that attitude in which . . . we rely utterly on the sufficiency of God. . . .Nor does it mean belief in a proposition, though doubtless intellectual beliefs are involved when we come to think it out.”

Luther felt that faith should be understood as the response of the total person, in trust, to God’s initiative in reaching out to His creation, most clearly revealed in the life and death of Jesus. Since “faith” for Luther was the inclination of the person’s heart or will, it follows that the object
of faith is not supernatural truth (i.e., belief), but God himself in his trustworthiness. Therefore, Luther often contrasted mere belief in some doctrine (e.g., that of the incarnation) with trusting in God’s good intentions for His creation. Employing Polanyian terminology, we might say that Luther’s concern was that Christian belief had lost sight of its tacit grounding. This did not preclude, in his mind, a proper role for explicit doctrine and responsible belief.

Professor Brand Blanshard admits that, although Protestantism has generally given more “latitude to thought and to conscience than Catholicism, its record is most inconsistent.” Luther, himself, warned that, in regard to intellectual curiosity relating to religious matters, “Thunder strikes him who examines.” And Professor Blanshard continues:

When Calvin sent Servetus to the stake for his wrong views about the Trinity, he had the cordial approval of Melanchthon and most other Protestant leaders; and John Knox argued that those who allowed active disbelievers to remain alive were themselves incurring the divine wrath. In the seventeenth century the Scotch clergy taught that food or shelter must on no occasion be given to a starving man unless his opinions were orthodox.

Still, the Protestant Reformation is generally, and rightly, recognized as one of the forces that contributed to the emergence in the sixteenth century of the Renaissance – the larger cultural transformation that brought into question a broader range of traditions suspected of having succumbed to blind belief or, at least, uncritical acceptance. Strongly affirming man’s rational capabilities and his inherent goodness, the eighteenth century Enlightenment ushered in dramatic new discoveries, most conspicuously in the new sciences and emerging technical innovations that, unfortunately, by a misconstrued perception of what constituted scientific methodology, led to a denial of the inextricably fiducial dimension of the process of discovery and knowing, and eventually to a rejection of faith itself.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the philosophical movement known as ‘positivism’ – an effort to regard and to define as real, or true, or of value only that which is tangible or quantifiable and which lends itself to empirical testing and proof. In this same period, a strong fundamentalist movement within American Christianity arose in protest of what was rightly perceived as a destruction, by Western positivism and scientism, of fundamental
cherished traditions and values. Ironically, fundamentalist Christianity, although critical of the tenets of positivism, has come unwittingly to embody a similar reduction of reality and truth by embracing its own strict literalism of unnuanced and unambiguous ‘fact.’ Therefore, I have argued elsewhere that Christian fundamentalism actually represents a species of positivism.\(^{48}\)

Christian fundamentalism – in both its Catholic and Protestant expressions – rests its entire case on the eviscerating and demythologizing of Christian symbolism and theological nuance by its insistence on a completely non-symbolic, indubitable, and literal interpretation of Christian scripture and the grounding of spiritual truths in the alleged historical facticity of events two to three millennia ago, whether it be in an ancient flood, an empty tomb, or a physical resurrection. Consequently, Christian fundamentalism, I would argue, by separating reason from faith, and by defining faith in terms of spurious belief, has done more to destroy the integrity of the faith than has secularism. While claiming to be true to the Christian faith, it has greatly distorted it; secularism, by way of contrast, by disclaiming any such pretension to faith, has merely ignored it.

The narrowly held beliefs that characterize fundamentalism, of whatever stripe – Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim, etc. – are beliefs that not only exclude dissenters, but do so condescendingly. It has commonly taken the form of formulaic belief systems designed to test others by the standards of self-righteous virtuosity. It is what I call a “Gotcha Christianity” – far removed from the compassionate inclusiveness that marked the founder of the faith. The adherents to this fastest growing segment of Christianity in the United States and in the world today are, I am quite certain, the people whom Karen Armstrong had in mind when she observed:

I sometimes think that if some Christians arrived in Heaven and found everybody there, they would be furious: Heaven wouldn’t be Heaven if the elect are deprived of the Schadenfreude of peering over the celestial parapets to watch the excluded unfortunates roasting below.\(^{49}\)

Indeed, not only a far cry from the humble compassion we associate with the early Christian communities, but just as conspicuously distant from what Michael Polanyi envisioned as a
convivial and humbly devoted ‘Society of Explorers.’

VI. A Proposed Resolution

I have attempted to support, by drawing upon the history of Christianity, a theologically sound understanding of Christian faith; and as a part of that effort, by giving attention to what has generally been referred to as ‘belief’, I have tried to show that there is an intellectual, or cognitive, and critical dimension of faith integral to, and therefore consistent with, its non-cognitive and a-critical dimensions – those that we have referred to as its specifically fiducial and its morally active aspects, namely trust and the commitment demonstrated in moral response. Faith, I have attempted to demonstrate, must be understood holistically – that is, in terms of a proper and dynamic relationship among all three of its constituent dimensions. Even my references to moments or phases in the history of Christianity, embodied in the Christian Church, that have represented breakdowns by way of imbalances in this dynamic relationship have had the positive intention of highlighting, by means of contrast, the importance of restoring and maintaining the vital balances upon which the integrity of faith depends.

I think that anyone attempting a similar survey, who is conversant with Michael Polanyi’s understanding of the tacit structure and the ‘indwelling’ and ‘breaking-out’ dynamics of the processes of discovery and knowing, cannot help but be struck by the range and depth of similarities between the Christian understanding of faith, properly conceived, and Polanyi’s epistemology – or, more generally, between the processes of faith and the processes of reason. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise when we remind ourselves that Polanyi, although limited in his knowledge-by-acquaintance with Christianity and Christian theology, was yet impressed by what he had come to know about these, particularly from his understanding of some of the Pauline and Augustinian insights into the faith process. And, as a number of Polanyian scholars have noted, despite the fact that he never felt sufficiently comfortable with Christianity to personally embrace it, he was sufficiently moved by what he understood to be its true and original vision, at the conclusion of his major epistemological treatise, to assign to Christianity, once restored and “released from . . . an absurd vision of the universe,” the role of “open[ing] up . . . a meaningful” view of the world, thereby providing mankind with “a purpose which bears on eternity.”
Within the limits of this essay, I can make only brief reference to the striking parallels between the Christian faith and Polanyi’s dynamic structure of knowing. For one thing, one easily detects a multiple dimensionality in his thought similar to the three-fold dimensionality that, I have suggested, characterizes the Christian faith. Just as the latter is structured on the fundamental concepts of (1) a trusting receptivity and openness to any unveiling of God’s ‘hiddenness’, (2) emergent and articulate religious beliefs, and (3) commitment that gives substance to the ‘object’ of our trust and the ability to give moral response to our beliefs, Polanyi’s structure of knowing is built upon the three concepts of (1) subsidiary and tacit intimations, even of that “for which we cannot account in terms of our specifiable capabilities,” (2) focal and explicit knowledge, and (3) an active commitment that permits the tacit processes of integration to come to focal fruition.

Consistent with the first, or the trusting, dimension of religious faith, Polanyi speaks of the inducement that is given to our “heuristic passion” by our sense of being epistemologically situated within a “heuristic field,” a cosmic world of “potentialities,” one that even points us in promising directions in our quest to “establish contact with reality” by the sense of a “gradient of meaning.” Progress in the heuristic endeavor is achieved by a tacit, although sometimes very laborious and painstaking, “relying on” one’s awareness of subsidiary particulars and “attending to” a “focal target” that, in the process of this “to/from” dynamic of awareness and attention, produces a more explicit and meaningfully integrated whole; or sometimes this endeavor is expressed in terms of “dwelling in” old paradigms and “breaking out” of them in order to establish radically new paradigms. All of this heuristic movement is provided with a structural parallel in Polanyi’s ontology of higher and lower levels, or degrees, of reality, each level a result of a progressive “emergence” from the lower levels by virtue of their boundaries’ openness to being ordered, and thereby given new meaning, by the principles of the higher levels. Richard Gelwick rightly points out that, for Polanyi “the pursuit of truth in any area is progressive but always incomplete due [not only to man’s finite capacities but also] to the unfolding of reality itself.” He reminds us of Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that, therefore, “we are always equidistant from eternity.”

Consistent with the second, or the belief, aspect of religious faith is Polanyi’s suggestion that we feel compelled, through our creative capacities of imagining and deciding, to integrate and bring coherence to our diverse intimations in a comprehensive and focal “comprehension”
that, indeed – by virtue of its still largely inarticulate, sometimes inarticulable, implications – represents an epistemological whole that is greater than the sum of its parts – reminiscent, may I suggest, of T.S. Eliot’s reference to a “wisdom that is greater than knowledge, and a knowledge that is greater than information” – all of which is promising in regard to “indeterminate future manifestations.”

The parallels between Christianity’s third, or moral, dimension of faith and Polanyi’s sense of epistemological commitment, it seems to me, are obvious as we think, for instance, on the one hand, of the moral imperatives of Christian discipleship and, on the other hand, of the driving, shared commitment which Polanyi perceived as characterizing the scientific “society of explorers” (and other such societies) and which he, himself, thoroughly embodied.

As I indicated early in this essay, I am not unaware of Polanyi’s failure to provide a completely satisfactory match between multiple facets of his theory of knowing, or reason, and the particulars of Christian faith. His definition of ‘reality’ is that which embodies or entails, by anticipation, a capacity for, or promise of, indeterminate future coherent manifestations -- and the greater this capacity, or potential, the greater the ‘reality’ – in this sense, offers greater or lesser comprehensiveness and depth of meaning. I think this is not only fully consistent with Christianity, but it also provides Christianity with a conceptual framework that not only can help to ward off some of the previously-incurred distortions of the faith but, indeed, also can aid in its gaining a deeper understanding of its own, properly conceived, faith. However, Polanyi’s occasional incorporation into his definition of reality, especially as he draws more directly from his experience as a scientist, the notion of an independent ‘out-thereness’ – of a tangibly experiencable ultimate check on excessive reliance upon the intuitive and anticipatory dimensions of knowing – stirs up the ghosts of the old ‘objectivism’ that Polanyi had set out, from the very beginning of his epistemological writings, to put to rest. And it sets up in Polanyi’s mind a criterial ambiguity that precludes his assignment of the same kind, or perhaps even degree, of reality that he had applied to scientific objects to the ‘objects’ experienced in the arts and in the humanities generally, and most emphatically in religious experience. Therefore, in regard to the process for demonstrating the truthfulness of a scientific statement, he employs the word “verification”; but the process for non-scientific endeavors is “validation.” This raised, not only for him but for others, the problem – one that remained essentially unresolved for Polanyi – of the question of God’s ‘reality’ – or at least the problem of whether He could be said to \textit{exist}. 
I sometimes wonder: If Polanyi had been not a physical chemist who, therefore, dealt primarily with atomic and molecular concepts, but instead, had been a quantum or string-theory scientist dealing with non-spatial, sub-atomic phenomena, whether he still would have considered the concept of ‘out-thereness’ to have been a relevant criterion for his determining the ‘reality’ of God. However, I appreciate Polanyi’s concern because I agree with his apparent assumption that the ‘potential for future indeterminate manifestations’ criterion, as much as it is an advance in the right direction, does not completely satisfy what seems to be entailed in our experience of what we call ‘real’, and Polanyi’s added criterion of an independent ‘out-thereness’ at least attempts to complete that definition, although – in regard to the non-scientific disciplines (or, more accurately, the non-scientific disciplines and the humanities, including religion) – the concept raises at least as many problems as it solves. I do not have an alternative criterion to offer.

Polanyi also had a problem in accommodating his thinking to a personal conceptualization of God (whether She ‘exists’ or not!). But I do not think this problem was inherent in the concepts of his epistemology. Rather, I think it had much more to do with his failure to consider the highly imaginative approach – what I alluded to earlier as the via eminentiae sense – by which Christian theologians have appreciated the personal metaphor as it has been applied to God from the beginning of Christianity. Marty Moleski points out to us the irony of the fact that Polanyi was able to see in man a capacity to reach out to his cosmos and to God, but at the same time unable to conceive of a God who reaches out to man. Some time ago I was puzzling over a brief biographical description of Michael Polanyi as “Stoic” in his perspective. Now, more recently, having gone back to review his epistemology in light of its implications for religious faith, I have come to appreciate the sheer courage with which he took on some of the largest philosophical and practical problems of his time. Although he occasionally uses the word ‘hope’, it is really a Stoic courage that dominantly characterizes, throughout, the tone of his writing, and which he has to offer fellow laborers in his society of intellectual explorers. An equally motivating hope would require, it seems to me, the assurance of a ‘hand’ reaching out to him, just as he, certainly most courageously reached out to it.

Others have pointed out the vast contrast between Polanyi’s perception of the expectation that scientists have for ultimately finding resolutions to the problems they encounter and his
perception of the lack of any such expectation on behalf of the religious worshipper. Indeed, he suggests that the religious person does not desire any such resolution but, instead, seeks to perpetuate the sense of tension and irresolution through the worship experience. To Polanyi, this is merely facing up to the inescapable nature of religious awareness, and in particular of the Christian experience: the fact that the Christian is confronted with experiences that are inherently incapable of resolution. The quest for answers in the spiritual life is, in his words, “an impossible quest.” This, it seems to me, is an example of where Polanyi seems to be completely out of touch with not only the worship experience, but also the Christian scriptures. To be sure, a major area of Christian theology, theodicy, struggles with the seemingly irresolvable issue of how a good and omnipotent God can permit evil to happen in the world, especially to innocent people, and to be sure, Christianity offers no easy or complete answers here. In this life, and in having to confront some of the evils that occur in this world, the only ‘answer’ is ‘trust,’ ‘have faith’ – that fragile and “tenuous bond” of which Voegelin speaks. Perhaps Polanyi’s resignation to this hard reality in his understanding of Christianity is a reflection of his admirable Stoicism to which we have just referred. But, one still has to wonder: Had he never read the assurances of the Beatitudes? Had he never discovered that a major portion of the Christian worship experience, expressed not only in Scripture, but also in liturgy and in hymnody, is the conveyance of the assurances and blessings that Jesus brought to the afflicted. To be sure, a prophetic preaching will not hesitate to ‘afflict the comforted,’ but the pastoral role of the minister is primarily to ‘comfort the afflicted.’ And I think most Christians will testify that there is a power at work in the Christian community that, indeed, brings genuine assurance and comfort to the afflicted. And there are available, in the theological teachings, at least relative, or tentative, closures available for the most vexing problems, even though, underlying all these tentative closures is Augustine’s acknowledgement that we do not find complete rest until, finally, after our time in this world, we come “face to face,” and “[we] find our rest in Thee.” In this sense, indeed, the solutions that science has to offer to the scientist, are more “complete” than any “solutions” available in the religious experience; but then, too, they are of quite a different kind and of far less comprehensive reach and depth in the scope of what they attempt to address. They need ask only “How?”, not “Why?” for they do not deal with a Person – which brings us back, perhaps, to the previously noted limitation in Polanyi’s ultimately impersonal understanding of ultimate, or transcendent, reality.
There are other, for the most part lesser, conflicts that have been alleged to exist in attempting to relate Polanyi’s understanding of the general structure of reason and his understanding of the structure of faith, which I shall not attempt to deal with here. For the most part, however, I find that Polanyi’s epistemological approach is very compatible with responsible Christian understandings of faith. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, I think that the vision that Polanyi has to offer through his redefinition of the fundamental concepts of discovery and knowing is no less than an opportunity for Christians to achieve a far deeper understanding of their own faith, through a more accurate understanding of the thought processes involved in the faith experience – in regard to all three of its dimensions. More specifically, Polanyi’s most important contribution, in my mind, is the relevance of his understanding of tacit intimation, with its fiducial implications for a receptive openness, to the Christian faith experience. It is particularly in this area that Christian thought has too often demonstrated an incredible narrowness – effecting both preclusion in regard to the correction of doctrinal error and closure that obviates new insights, whether essentially intuitive or empirical, crucial for spiritual growth.

Am I suggesting a kind of universal revelation (a concept that has usually been deemed ‘heretical’ by ecclesiastical authority), that is, an understanding of faith that draws not only from the canonical sources but, far more broadly, from many sources, indeed the whole range of experiences in life? This is certainly the perspective that Polanyi’s epistemology encourages. I have no problem, theological or philosophical, with it. However, it is important to realize that Polanyi’s principle of epistemological openness and trust – even his occasional hopeful anticipation, are presented in the context of a hierarchical order of being, where persons are perceived by Polanyi to embody, through ‘emergence,’ not only a vast range of previous levels of potential, now achieved, but also the potential of indeterminate future, higher-level achievement. This, by definition, Polanyi tells us, makes people more meaningful, and in this sense more ‘real,’ and places them at a higher level than cobblestones. What this ontological structure of emergence tells us, says Polanyi as he elaborates its epistemological implications, is that the more emergent and richer ‘constellations’ are far more ‘revelatory’ than lower-level ‘constellations’; that is, people are far richer sources of meaning and inspiration than are cobblestones (not that we cannot learn also by studying them). The whole ‘noosphere’ of culture that human beings have produced is of far more epistemological and inherent value, whatever expressions of creativity the highest forms of animal life (e.g., chimpanzees, dolphins . . .) have managed. Certainly this defends those who embrace Polanyi’s epistemology from the ‘heresy’
of universal revelation, at least to the extent that not all sources of revelatory insight are regarded – as Thomas Aquinas also knew – to be of equal value. In fact, Polanyi ranks some types of human inquiry and knowing – judged by their complexity and their potential for opening indeterminate future avenues of insight – ‘higher’ than others. For instance, he places moral and religious inquiry at the top of his heuristic pyramid. Some religiously scrutinizing minds might still say, “Well, this still doesn’t make Jesus more than one among any number of prophets and martyrs, nor does it make Christianity the Queen of the Religions. To be sure, it does not – at least by any a priori set of epistemological principles. However, I would argue that it is totally consistent with Polanyi’s epistemological scheme to allow for the making of a posteriori judgments, or valuations based on experience – that, for example, rate the spiritual significance of one person’s life higher than another’s, or one religion higher than another. In fact, although Polanyi did not choose to make such a judgment in regard to Christianity, his whole system is predicated on the importance of making such judgments and evaluations, as he in fact did in regard to just about every other field of knowledge.

I can say that, having engaged fairly extensively in the study of religion, in particular Christianity, and to some – although lesser – extent the other world religions, I have chosen a particular religion – Christianity – to embrace. It is with some confidence that I can say that I have found more depth of meaning embodied in the life and teachings of Jesus, and that more meaning continues to unfold from my study and reflection on that person than any other individual whose ideas or life-story I have encountered. Still, however extensive and varied my experiences, I must agree with Polanyi that our knowing is always significantly shaped by the time, place, and culture in which we are situated. That is not relativism (in the sense of the claim that no experience or assertion can be rated as revealing more value or more truth than any other). That is simply a humble acknowledgement that no one can escape the limitations of perspectival knowing. Indeed, in terms of Polanyi’s epistemology, it is self-contradictory to speak of ‘context-free’ knowing. I am suggesting, further, that all truth claims are inevitably expressed in the language, the idioms, and the conceptual categories that the claimant’s cultural and historical ‘place’ has made available to him. This, of course, includes one’s understanding and expression of his or her faith.

Does my adoption of this epistemological perspectivism place me in danger of being a ‘heretic’? Well, if it does, it also would appear to make Jesus himself out to be a heretic. The
faith he embraced and preached was articulated entirely in terms of the very limited cosmology of his time and place, and in terms of the distinctive idiom of his Aramaic language, some of this idiom further translated in terms of his grounding in Hebrew scripture and ritual. But the most fundamental and radical principles and imperatives of his faith, I would argue, transcended the localism, or provincialism, of both idiom and tradition. Obviously, had his upbringing been in the context of a Buddhist culture, his spiritual expression would have been shaped and articulated in terms of Buddhist idioms and practices. However, I am confident that, given Jesus’ demonstrated capacity for deep meditation, for a depth of tacit indwelling that probed deeply and beyond the such relatively superficial cultural imprints as language and idiom, in whatever cultural idioms his ideas might have emerged, he would be responding to the same God, and therefore articulating in substance, if not in form, the same dependence upon and devotion to his Heavenly Father (or Mother, if in a matriarchal culture) and the same moral imperative of compassionate love. Both the Christian faith and the fundamental tenets of Polanyi’s epistemology tell us that we, too, share in this capacity.  

I conclude by suggesting that the fundamental principles of Michael Polanyi’s epistemology have provided us with the conceptual tools for closing the – at times seemingly unbridgeable – gap between religious faith and even what has generally been perceived to be secular reason. And I suggest that the main principle in Polanyi’s thinking that allows for this is what we might call his gradient of continuity. Well before we even get to the ‘high octane’ fiduciary content of religious faith, Polanyi makes it clear that the same fiduciial element is operative throughout the whole spectrum of rational endeavor, even in science, but in increasing portion and intensity as we move to social inquiry and, further, on to the humanities. In other words, religious faith lies on the very same continuum that entails both faith, in its most unspecifiable and trusting dimension, and reason, in its most formal and articulate dimension, although in varying proportions relative to each other and varying intensities. As we move from science to the arts and ultimately to spiritual inquiry and comprehension, we do not begin to rely on faith, but we do rely upon it to a greater degree, and with bolder commitment. Once we become aware of this continuity between reason and faith, it would seem that his two modes of confirmation – verification and validation – themselves represent a common process that differs only in degree, as that process of confirmation is applied to the gradient of fields of inquiry to which we have just referred. Is there, then, as we increasingly involve ourselves in matters of increasing aesthetic or, still further, spiritual nature, any point along this gradient at which we
can abandon reason completely? Some mystics might claim they have succeeded in leaving the
cognitive factor completely behind in some kind of totally emptying Buddhistic “Ohmmmmm.”
But here I would say, and I think Polanyi would agree, that we then no longer have not only
reason, but we no longer have faith itself. Instead, what we then have is either complete vacuity,
or at most a ranting and railing, a speaking in tongues that no longer ‘speak,’ and if not a
complete abandonment of words, at least a complete disconnect of our words with the Word,
with that which Polanyi says, if we are attuned to our tacit intimations, beckons us on “to
increase ever further our hold on reality.”

Polanyi never gave up on the human capacity for articulate and rational comprehension
because he never lacked faith in the capacity of our most elusive and tacit intimations to guide us
toward such articulate comprehension, even if the articulated concepts and words themselves –
as he realized – must inevitably fall short of the enormous task we would like to assign to them,
that of opening our minds to more than a bare glimpse of the Transcendent, a mere fragmentary
and fleeting glimpse of that Which, or Whom, we can for now see only “in a glass darkly,” even
though God has blessed us with the assurance, and Michael Polanyi has reminded us, that there
are, indeed, “things we know that we cannot say.” This epigrammatic statement from Polanyi,
itsel, is a statement of faith.

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ENDNOTES


2 Among those who have, to various extents, insightfully taken up this subject as authors of books, and to whom I
am indebted, are two individuals no longer with us: Joan Crewdson and Harry Prosch. Among the other authors are
Richard Gelwick, Thomas Torrance, Esther Meek, Marty Moleski, Mark Mitchell, whose book on Polanyi is just
out, and Tony Clark whose dissertation is currently in the process of being published. And I am grateful also to
others for their contributions through articles they have authored and through discussions – Phil Mullins, Dale
Cannon, Walter Gulick, to name just a few.


Press, 2005).

5 Mullins and Moleski, “Harry Prosch: A Memorial Re-Appraisal of the *Meaning* Controversy,” *Tradition and

7 Michael Polanyi, p. 262.


9 Michael Polanyi, p.


14 Here I must note that Tony Clark, in his dissertation mentioned above, has done a masterful job of pointing out the many epistemological principles held in common by Barth and Polanyi, something that has not, to my knowledge, been previously so well documented. However, despite these very significant commonalities in the structure of their thinking, a fundamental difference (among others) of great consequence between the two thinkers, and one in fact recognized by Polanyi, is this diametrical opposition that I have been suggesting between the conclusions they come to on the question the compatibility of faith and secular reasoning. Still, the contrast between Polanyi and Barth is not as categorical as would be the case with some of the others I have mentioned, since –as Clark does well to point out -- Barth makes a distinction, important to his thinking, between secular and religious reason – something that I shall elaborate upon shortly in this essay.


16 Barth does, however, substitute for the concept of analogia entis, literally ‘analogy from things’ (an epistemological mode relied upon more ‘integrationist’ understandings of faith and reason) the reverse concept of analogia fidei, literally ‘analogy of faith’ – the concept, by drawing upon one’s revelation-based “religious reason,” one can, by coming to understand the perfect manifestation of Fatherhood in God’s relation to His Son, Jesus Christ, gain insights into what human fatherhood, or parenthood, should be like, in its most perfect – and therefore strictly unattainable – form.

17 Michael Polanyi, p. 262. In the course of a conversation with Polanyi in Oxford, England, during the summer of 1970, I had the same impression of his reticence to venture far into religious matters. In seeking his reaction to a statement I made proposing that his epistemology suggested new ways of comprehending the structure of spiritual insight, particularly what had traditionally been recognized as revelatory experience, Polanyi seemed to be genuinely excited at this prospect, but he immediately suggested that it was something that he felt compelled to encourage others, with the appropriate backgrounds, to take up.


19 Interestingly, Scott and Moleski report briefly that “in early June [1959], Polanyi had lunch with C.P. Snow . . .” revealing nothing about their lunch-time conversation, but indicating a strong difference between them, expressed in essays they had previously written, regarding the impact of science on the rest of culture. Michael Polanyi, pp. 235-236. Snow’s The Two Cultures was expanded in 1964 under the title The Two Cultures and a Second Look (Cambridge University Press). The expanded version offers no rethinking of Snow’s views vis a vis Polanyi’s.

20 Walter B. Mead, “Faith and Reason.” (Unpublished paper delivered at the University of South Florida, Sarasota, Florida, on February 21, 2006.)
Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003). Hart’s more recent and much briefer, *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* (Eerdmans, 2005), although conceived as a theodicy, provides a more developed exposition of the aesthetic structure of his theology. His insights represent a major contribution to Christian thought. My only caveat in regard to the primacy he assigns to the aesthetic idiom in theology is that, as useful as this conceptual approach is to providing a deeper understanding and articulation of the faith, it seems to me that the moral idiom allows us to go even deeper.


Referring to what I have termed “conceptual” knowing, Dale Cannon instead uses the phrase “representational” knowing in his excellent examination of knowing by acquaintance, in “Construing Polanyi’s Tacit Knowing as Knowing by Acquaintance Rather than Knowing by Representation: Some Implications,” in *Tradition and Discovery*, v. 29, no. 2 (2002-2003), pp. 26-43.

*The Idea of Revelation*, p. 28.


However, Koch (“The Hebrew Truth Concept. . .”) observes that because of the close Hebrew connection between truth and dependability – the latter term being implicitly future-directed – means [in Harvey Cox’s words] “that the Hebrew view of truth points toward the future – one trusts in what God will bring to pass. Truth is conformity with what will be, now with what is. This means that belief in belief in Biblical thinking has more to do with hope than with credulity.” (Cox, “Non-theistic Commitment,” p.403.)


Paul Tillich comments on this same distortion in the common understanding of faith when he observes that “the concept of faith has lost its genuine meaning and has received the connotation of ‘belief in something unbelievable’.” (*The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952), p.172.)

This was reported to Bill Scott in a 1994 interview with Harry Prosch. Mullins and Moleski, “Harry Prosch: A Memorial,” p.16.


Ibid., p.96.

Ibid.


*From Newman’s University Sermons*, pp. 183-84, quoted in M. Moleski, S.J., *Personal Catholicism*.

*The Idea of Revelation*, p. 29.
40 Ibid., p. 86.
41 Ibid., p. 31.
43 The Idea of Revelation, p. 33.
45 The Idea of Revelation, p. 87. The quotation from Professor Dodd is from his book, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (N.Y., 1932), pp. 15f..
47 Ibid.
50 Personal Knowledge, p. 92.
51 Ibid. p. 324.
54 The religious implications of this are insightfully expanded upon in Esther Lightcap Meek, Longing to Know (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003).
55 See H. Richard Niebuhr’s very thoughtful study that probes into some of the distinctions I have attempted to make here in regard to relations between religious insight and culture: Christ and Culture (N.Y.: Harper & Brothers, 1951). Niebuhr looks at the issue under such chapter headings as “The Christ of Culture,” “Christ Above Culture,” “Christ Against Culture,” etc.
56 Personal Knowledge, p. 403.