

Introduction



IFIRST MET WITH the thought of Michael Polanyi in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin in the late 1980s. Newbigin refers to Polanyi in many of his publications and makes extensive use of his ideas in the early chapters of *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Newbigin prompted me to take a closer look at Polanyi's work and I became increasingly fascinated with the project with which he was engaged.

Many authors have written on the interrelationship of Christian beliefs and science. Polanyi was doing something different. He was not primarily interested in religion¹; his “evangelical zeal” was for the life of science. Polanyi sought to articulate a theory of knowledge—and a philosophy of science—which authentically represented the *practice* of science.² One of Polanyi's startling conclusions is that scientific practice and progress are possible only when scientists embrace and participate in the “beliefs” which are intrinsic to the scientific community. What is more, these “beliefs” cannot be fully articulated, yet they are “known” and held through nurture and training within the scientific community. The life of science is, in this sense, a “life of faith” that is expressed and lived out within a community of “believers”. Such language comes to the fore explicitly in the title of one of Polanyi's earlier philosophical writings, *Science, Faith and Society*.

What Polanyi has done is to expose the fiduciary nature of scientific work. While it is clear that Polanyi was not engaged in any kind of Christian apologetic, it occurred to me—as it had Newbigin and others before me—that Polanyi's work might have important insights for Christian thought and theology.

Just over a decade later, I was confronted for the first time (in a substantial way) by the work of Karl Barth. As had been the case with Polanyi, I was struck by the originality and rigor of Barth's thought. His doctrine of the Word of God, as it is expressed in the first three part volumes of *Church Dogmatics*, clarified for me some key issues about what it might mean for God to make himself known. Revelation, for Barth, is not the text of Holy Scripture, nor is it an “inner light” by which we can choose to know God. Revelation is not something that is, or can become, our possession but an “event” (as Barth would have it) in which God makes himself known by making himself present through the Spirit.

1. Although, as I shall demonstrate in the excursus, it is a significant secondary theme in his writings.

2. He felt that the philosophy of science, in modern times, had served to obscure rather than illuminate scientific practice.

Early on in my acquaintance with Barth's work, I started to puzzle over how his work stood in relation to Polanyi's. Polanyi had written on religious and theological themes, but those writings were, of all Polanyi's work, the most disappointing. He had described the life of science as participation in a "faith community" but had somehow missed—or substantially missed—the significance of this for religion. It seems that he lacked a sufficient grounding in religious and theological traditions. As a consequence the profound insights, evident in other aspects of his work, did not seem to flow into his treatment of religion. Barth's work represents something of a counterpoint to Polanyi's in that his theology is expressed out of a rich awareness of, and engagement within, the Christian tradition. However, despite the rigor with which Barth expresses his doctrine of the Word of God, and the effectiveness with which he differentiated his own position from the liberal tradition in which he had been nurtured, his discussion of how it is that we participate in this reality (by the grace of God) is significantly understated in his treatment of the doctrine.

As I reflected upon these things, it occurred to me that much might be gained by bringing some of the key ideas of these two intellectual giants into dialogue. Although Polanyi and Barth were contemporaries, it seems that they never met, nor is there any evidence that either of them was in any way influenced by the other.³ However, the possibilities of such a conversation remain, and this work represents, as its major theme, an attempt to explore them.⁴

The chapters of this book are far from uniform in their approach, and a description of what I am attempting in each may be of assistance to the reader. The first chapter is expository in nature. It sets out Barth's doctrine of the Word of God on its own terms in an attempt to establish a point of departure for the doctrine of revelation that I seek to develop.

In the second chapter I ask some critical questions of Barth's doctrine, noting, among other things, that his acknowledgement of human participation in God's revelation is problematically understated. There are elements within his doctrine of the Word of God that threaten to eclipse the possibility of genuine human participation in revelation, and these must be confronted. Here I draw upon the work of several theologians, and Alan Torrance's book, *Persons in Communion*, in particular. Chapter 2 anticipates the significance of Polanyi's work but does not seek to establish or explore it.

3. It does appear that Polanyi knew of Barth. In a notebook made during a visit to Berlin: November 27—December 3, 1947, Polanyi mentions a meeting with the brother of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the afternoon of Sunday November 30 during which they "Talk about Brunner and K. Barth." See "Polanyi Collection: Regenstien Library, University of Chicago." Box 44, Folder 5. No mention is made of the content of the discussion.

4. I am aware that some theologians have explored the possible interaction of the work of Barth and Polanyi along different lines. T. F. Torrance is, perhaps, the most outstanding example of a theologian who has engaged with Polanyi. His work is marked by, among other things, his engagement with Polanyi's ontology.

The third chapter is an exposition of Polanyi's work. Paralleling, in certain respects, the first chapter, it seeks to set out the various components of Polanyi's epistemology as an essential and somewhat extended preparation for articulating its significance for the main theme of the book. This is followed by an excursus that extends the exposition of Polanyi to his treatment of religion and theology. Although my evaluation of this aspect of Polanyi's work is a substantially negative one, it would seem inappropriate not to acknowledge his own contribution before going on to explore what I consider to be a more viable extension of his general epistemology in the general field of theological work—and the doctrine of revelation in particular.

Chapter 4 represents my first substantial attempt at a synthesis of the work of Barth and Polanyi. It takes the form of what I describe as a "Polanyian reading" of Barth's discussion of church confessions in *Church Dogmatics I.2*.⁵ Here I attempt both to discern how some of the insights in Polanyi's work are already paralleled in Barth's method, and to suggest ways in which Polanyian insights might be adopted in order to develop and expand the kind of theological project in which Barth is engaged.

The fifth chapter extends the intentions of chapter 4 but adopts a significantly different trajectory. Here I refer back to Alan Torrance's critique of Barth and suggest several lines along which this might be extended. A significant element of Torrance's proposal is found in his discussion of "semantic participation." I suggest that to the semantic it is appropriate to add the epistemic, the bodily, and the hermeneutical, as further crucial (if not discrete) aspects that are integral to our participation in revelation.

The sixth and final chapter is an attempt to open up the question of imagination in relation for my main theme. The first half of this chapter is an exposition of Gordon Kaufman's treatment of imagination in theology. This functions as an example of how the relationship between theology and imagination can be seriously misconstrued. Out of my critique of Kaufman, the contours of an alternative approach are suggested in which, once again, I draw from the insights of Polanyi's work.

I believe that this work contains some important and original proposals for rearticulating a doctrine of revelation. It will be apparent that in bringing the work of Polanyi and Barth together, one significant purpose of the book is to make suggestions for further developments. Given this purpose, rather than drawing many threads together in a synthesizing conclusion, it is deliberately open ended, suggesting and provoking, I hope, further inquiry.

5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 621–60.