

# INTEGRATIVE THEOLOGY: A POLANYIAN PROPOSAL FOR THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

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THE STATUS of theology as a genuine discipline has been the subject of considerable discussion lately.<sup>1</sup> The common theme unifying this discussion has been the attempt to explore and evaluate basic presuppositions or grounds upon which theology may function in an open and accountable manner. Thus, while there have appeared varying emphases from divergent viewpoints, the recent discussion has focused on understanding foundations whereby theology might be conceived as a legitimate discipline which seeks after truth with its own proper procedures. This clearly stands in marked contrast to a popular view of theology as the mere reiteration of the traditional beliefs of a particular community based on an unquestioned acceptance of formulas from revelation or dogmatic creeds. Such an understanding was unproblematic where the "truth" of such revelation or dogma could be presupposed. In our pluralistic society it is not too surprising that theology often has unacceptable connotations in the minds of many whose primary frame of reference is some sphere of secular thought. Consequently, this new development in theological self-understanding is of considerable importance not only for the religious believer but even more for all those who are seriously inquiring into the meaning and significance of being human.

While the status of natural science as a complex of disciplines promoting genuine advances in human knowledge about the world has not been seriously questioned in recent times, its philosophical foundations as an inquiry into truth have been so challenged. This was, in fact, the precise issue which provoked Michael Polanyi to explore and evaluate the presuppositions or grounds upon which science openly and intelligently functions. In so doing, however, Polanyi discovered that he had to probe to the very presuppositions of all intelligent activity. It was not sufficient to uncover and formulate precisely the empirical and logical procedures and criteria used by scientists, as much of the philosophy of science had

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., G. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975); B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); A. Nygren, *Meaning and Method in Philosophy and Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); E. Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1974); D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975); and several of the essays in *Philosophy of Religion and Theology: 1975 Proceedings*, compiled by J. W. McClendon, Jr. (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975).

been content to do. Rather, he found that if we are to accredit our ability to make true discoveries about reality through science, we must clarify and establish how we accept any logical methods and criteria in the first place, and that we can successfully use them in our attempts to discover the meanings of reality.

The main thrust of Polanyi's endeavor can thus be understood to have an intent similar to those involved in the current discussion of the basis of theological understanding. Both are concerned with the fundamental intelligent operations whereby meaning is grasped and truth is affirmed. Of course, Polanyi's proposal for understanding the general features of human knowing derived principally from his inquiry into scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, insofar as he was successful in clarifying the fundamental operations of all intelligent activity, his proposal should have considerable import for the current discussion concerning theology.

The aim of this essay is to explore the contributions that Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge can make to this discussion. The primary contention will be that there are several systematic elements in Polanyi's thought which have implications for elaborating the formal procedures of theological inquiry. This would presuppose, however, a preliminary clarification of the meaningfulness and intelligibility of religious belief. Accordingly, we shall first outline an interpretation of religious belief<sup>2</sup> based on Polanyi's insights into human knowing, and then offer an explanation of theological understanding based on it. This may serve two purposes: (1) indicate the potential contribution of Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge to theology, and (2) offer a substantive contribution to the current discussion on the status of theology itself.

## I

Fundamentally, the major problem confronting religious belief in a secular context is its apparent meaninglessness. Many who have encountered the genuine values inherent in a secular world view no longer view religious belief as an authentic option. While the historical forces that have led to this situation are complex,<sup>3</sup> two may be noted as crucial to

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this interpretation, along with a more thorough documentation of the sources from Polanyi's works sustaining it, may be found in my *Doers of the Word: Toward a Foundational Theology Based on the Thought of Michael Polanyi* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1977) 139-73.

<sup>3</sup> Polanyi's analysis of modern cultural history as pushing critical consciousness to its extreme limits, which led to personal and sociopolitical variants of "moral inversion," is helpful here for a broad overview, though it does not deal specifically with the question of religious belief. See his *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958) 224-45; *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1967) 55-63, 80-87; and in *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Greene (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), these essays: "Beyond Nihilism" 3-23, "The Message of the Hungarian Revolution" 24-39, and "The Two Cultures" 40-46.

our discussion. The demand for critical objectivity which ushered in the modern era restricted meaningful experience to the empirical and aggrandized autonomous reason at the expense of tradition. In its extreme form this demanded that nothing would count as "knowledge" unless one could test it for oneself. Within such a context religious belief could hardly appear to be more than subjective feeling, and attachment to traditional doctrine nothing more than romantic self-indulgence. Insofar as this attitude has come to predominate in the West, the traditional symbols and language of religion have ceased to be credible vehicles of meaning for informing our lives, because there appeared to be no place within secular experience that required or could sustain such meaning.

This is, of course, primarily a problem for understanding religious belief. All through the modern and contemporary eras there have been innumerable believers who were more or less untroubled by this problem. Unfortunately, human beings are members of their culture. As the dominant secular spirit increasingly permeates all our intelligent activities, the problems become more pressing in our consciousness. The need for believers to give an intelligent accounting of the existential significance of faith and the value of traditional religious symbolism thus becomes an integral element of faith itself in the contemporary context. Precisely how can we say we "experience," and thus come to "know," God? Why should such experiences be interpreted "religiously" instead of simply psychologically? How can the traditional symbols and doctrines of Christianity be shown to be meaningful for interpreting such experiences? Such questions posed to religious believers are the concrete forms that the present challenge of meaninglessness takes.<sup>4</sup> And it is precisely at this profound level that Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge can offer a systematic analysis of our intelligent activity which enables us to deal with this problem. A brief review of the salient features of his theory will provide the basis upon which this claim may be demonstrated.

Polanyi's fundamental insight into the process of human knowing is that "we can know more than we can tell."<sup>5</sup> This means that knowing consists of both explicit and tacit components, and further that this tacit dimension in our knowing is the basis of our explicit knowledge. But the most important consequence of this insight is that Polanyi has been able to explain how our knowledge is a dynamic activity.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on the process of discovery, which serves as his paradigm for knowing,<sup>7</sup> Polanyi

<sup>4</sup> It should be clear that the problem posed by secular culture goes deeper than defending the truth claims of Christianity. What is *meant* by a claim, such as "God created the world," is at issue. Not until this is clarified by a believer can the logically subsequent question of its truth be dealt with. An excellent description of this problem may be found in L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *The Tacit Dimension* 4.

<sup>6</sup> M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) 38, 57.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tacit Dimension* 24.

has been able to uncover the basic operations functioning throughout our intelligent activity, whether these appear in the form of skills, perceptions, or the imaginative thrust of the creative arts.

Stating it formally, we can say that all explicit knowledge aims at an integration of subsidiarily known particulars into a focal whole. Such an integration is tacit and cannot be likened to formal deductions or explicit inferences, because the former is an activity that is making the subsidiaries bear on the focus and is achieved only by a conscious act of a person.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, all our explicit knowledge is founded upon our tacit powers of integration.

The structure of this tacit integration has been further specified by Polanyi in terms of its functional, phenomenal, semantic, and ontological aspects.<sup>9</sup> In an act of knowing, the subsidiaries are known tacitly in terms of their functional relation to a focal object. Further features of reality not apparent in the subsidiaries will appear in the coherence established by the tacit integration.<sup>10</sup> A quality not apparent in the disjointed particulars becomes known in the phenomenon comprehended by the tacit integration. This, in turn, implies that the meaning of the particulars is not exhausted by their subsidiary status. They also have a joint meaning which is known in the focal whole by the tacit integration. Such a reliance on particulars to focus on their joint meaning through a tacit integration is the semantic aspect of tacit knowing. Finally, our reliance on particulars as tokens having a bearing on reality presupposes that our integrations open us to an aspect of reality. All our claims thus are ontologically grounded.

This last aspect of tacit knowing raises the question of the validity of our powers of integration. We are required to examine how our tacit powers of integration enable us to make true affirmations. Explaining this will complete sufficiently a review of Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge that will enable us to give an intelligible accounting of religious belief. For this purpose we may return to an analysis of the paradigmatic case of scientific discovery.

Scientific discoveries are not chance occurrences. Rather, the scientist, by submitting himself to the body of tradition that makes up science itself, pursues possibilities suggested by this fund of knowledge. In this pursuit he is guided by a tacit foreknowledge,<sup>11</sup> an anticipation of a deeper coherence, which his questing intuition is attempting to integrate focally

<sup>8</sup> *Meaning* 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> For an example of Polanyi's discussion of these features, see *The Tacit Dimension* 10-13. For a more detailed analysis, see my *Doers of the Word* 102-7.

<sup>10</sup> *Meaning* 35, 134.

<sup>11</sup> See *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Phoenix edition, 1964) 24; "The Creative Imagination," *Chemical and Engineering News* 44 (1966) 88; and *The Tacit Dimension* 23.

from the material put forth by his fertile imagination.<sup>12</sup> The two elements in this process operate continuously until the resolution is achieved whereby the scientist may affirm the truth of his discovery. The ultimate grounds upon which such judgments are made are tacitly held. A closer examination of this process will explain why this is so, and at the same time how this allows our knowledge to go beyond subjective whim.

Scientific thought unfolds by individual scientists accepting the authority embodied in science. They dwell in the meaning disclosed by the scientific enterprise. Such indwelling includes, of course, explicit criteria of judgments of truth, such as standard empirical procedures and logical consistency with the body of accepted theory. But in the case of a profound discovery which revolutionizes scientific theory, these proximate and explicit criteria are being reshaped and so are of little help. Here the scientist must rely on ultimate criteria which are not specifiable because they are held tacitly in the making of the judgment about the validity of the newly discovered coherence.<sup>13</sup> Such creative breakthroughs are possible only because the knowledge we affirm is tacitly understood by us to be an aspect of reality; and since our judgments are tacitly grounded on perceptible clues to the real, we expect our affirmations to lead us to still undisclosed aspects of reality. Thus, while the scientist accepts the ultimate standards created by science and dares to go beyond them by proposing new criteria inherent in his discovery, he never does this "subjectively." He is guided ultimately by the tacit foreknowledge of the real that was originally opened to his intuition by accepting the standards of science and dwelling in them. Having discerned a new coherence, he then affirms its truth with universal intent.<sup>14</sup> He affirms, in other words, that the coherence he has discovered is a genuine aspect of reality, and that all those who share his expanded mental framework will be able to discern this coherence also.

What clearly emerges from this analysis of scientific discovery is that our explicit affirmations of truth never exhaust the full significance of the meaningful coherence our tacit integration has achieved, even though they do adequately grasp an aspect of the reality in the context of a particular intellectual framework. Our judgments of truth thus have an "unfinished" characteristic, precisely because in the act of judging we are tacitly relating ourselves to an aspect of reality, and, insofar as it is real, it can manifest itself indeterminately in the future.<sup>15</sup> The ultimate grounds

<sup>12</sup> For a typical example of Polanyi's analysis of the tacit powers at work in scientific discovery, see *Meaning* 57-61.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 189.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., "Tacit Knowing: Its Bearing on Some Problems in Philosophy," in *Knowing and Being* 168.

by which we judge truly cannot be specified, because we are relying on them in the act of making the judgment.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, such ultimate grounds are tacitly known in the compelling force of having achieved a new coherence through the discovery which affirms a meaningful aspect of reality.

By means of this analysis of scientific discovery, then, we have disclosed that a "dimension of ultimacy"<sup>17</sup> is a constituent feature of our knowing activity. We ultimately rely on the tacitly held standards of our common cultural heritage and, guided by a tacit foreknowledge, expect to find new meaning in reality in the form of integrations leading to a more profound appreciation of coherence. The significance of analyzing the process of creative discovery lies in the fact that these features of tacit knowing are more easily discernible. In fact, however, we dwell in our cultural frameworks and rely on our tacit foreknowledge of the real in every act of knowing.<sup>18</sup> Since the formal structure of tacit knowing is operative in every instance of its use, we may conclude that this dimension of ultimacy provides the tacit orientation which directs human inquiry to all reality.

Our analysis of the foundations of human knowing has led us to understand that there is a dimension permeating our conscious lives which grounds the proximate norms of meaning in our culture and which draws us ever more fully into a more integral appreciation of reality. In this sense it is the ultimate source and goal of all meaning. Further, this dimension of ultimacy is present in every human consciousness and transcends all cultural limitations because it grounds culture. Should the circumscribed meaning of reality tacitly held by a particular world view ever become problematic for an individual, this dimension would make its presence felt with increasing urgency in that individual's consciousness. The significance of this sort of experience, however, is ambiguous. Nevertheless, because it raises genuine questions of ultimate meaning, this experience may be described formally as religious. Furthermore, because the source of such an experience is a constituent feature of all our knowing, and since potentially anyone may have it in some form or another, we may conclude that in this formal sense everyone is religious.

This conclusion does not claim, it must be emphasized, that everyone in fact will come to such an experience of ultimacy, nor even that, if someone does, it will be interpreted positively. The reason for the former is that, unless an attempt to experience this dimension of ultimacy is deliberately fostered (as, we shall argue, it is in religious traditions), or

<sup>16</sup> *Meaning* 61.

<sup>17</sup> This term is from Langdon Gilkey, who has come to a similar conclusion through a phenomenological analysis of contemporary cultural consciousness; see his *Naming the Whirlwind* 296-414.

<sup>18</sup> *The Tacit Dimension* 33.

unless the experience comes to an individual somewhat in the manner we described above, this dimension will simply function as a tacit feature of our knowing process without ever being noticed. The reason for the latter is that, unless the individual who comes to this experience can appreciate it through some integral cosmic vision, the experience can thrust one into a chasm of meaningless nothingness.<sup>19</sup>

What the conclusion does imply is that an intelligent account of religious belief may be provided by means of the analysis of human knowing proposed by Polanyi. We have seen that the dimension of ultimacy is a constituent feature of our tacit knowledge and that it can become the focus of our questing. Religious belief can now be understood to be that form of indwelling which has as its primary goal the “breaking out”<sup>20</sup> toward the whole of reality tacitly experienced as the dimension of ultimacy. The believer’s focal awareness, in other words, transcends the normal bounds of cultural indwelling by converging toward the tacit ground of foreknowledge in a literally incomprehensible integration.

While this formal analysis removes the objection which purports that there is nothing in our secular experience to which belief may refer, it is not the whole of the matter. So far our analysis has provided an intelligible account of religious belief formally considered from the vantage point of the structure of human knowing. In the concrete process of breaking out, however, religions make claims about ultimate reality and the world. We must complete our analysis by explaining the basis of the meaningfulness of such religious claims.

The question now before us requires that we explore the fundamental conditions whereby we might be able to come to a meaningful integration of the “object” toward which religious belief transcends. We must explain, in other words, the conditions that permit a religious believer to recognize what we may term the “sacred” in the act of breaking out.

The first condition is that we recognize the possibility of the manifestation of the sacred within history. The reason for this is that, if there is an ultimate meaning to reality, the human mind cannot comprehend it. “Comprehension,” we may recall, is the integration of particulars into a focal whole by means of our reliance on an intellectual framework. Insofar as the dimension of ultimacy, which orients us toward the sacred, is the ultimate basis by which we comprehend, it cannot be comprehended in itself. Therefore, if there is an ultimate meaning, its significance can only be disclosed by the sacred itself. Because the dimension of ultimacy does in fact orient us to the totality of reality, this would enable us, indeed it would require us, to be open to a possible initiative on the part of the sacred.

<sup>19</sup> *Personal Knowledge* 199.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 195–202 for Polanyi’s use of this term.

The second condition requires that we come to dwell in a religious tradition. This is simply a specification of Polanyi's insight that all thought unfolds through anterior frameworks.<sup>21</sup> In short, the beginning of the understanding of the sacred is a conversion—no matter how tentative or provisional it may initially be.<sup>22</sup> If our analysis has been understood so far, it should be clear that this is anything but an appeal to blind authoritarianism. On the contrary, the coming to dwell in a religious tradition is a recognition of the possibility for the discernment of a richer integration of meaning wherein the tacit experience of the dimension of ultimacy is most prominent. Or, as Polanyi has put it, in such existential choices "freedom is continuous service."<sup>23</sup>

A final condition for recognizing the sacred requires appreciating the distinctive characteristic of religious language and practice. It is common for students of religion to insist that properly religious language is symbolic, metaphorical, or analogical. Polanyi's analysis of symbol clarifies why this is so. A symbol is a self-giving integration which not only integrates subsidiaries into a focal whole but also surrenders the "diffuse memories and experiences of the self *into* this object." Through a symbol the person also experiences a kind of integration, because the person is "carried away" by the symbol.<sup>24</sup> There is a significant difference between artistic creations and religious conceptions insofar as religious ritual and language function to guide the believer to break out toward the transcendent source of ultimacy recognized as the sacred. But in both, unless one is carried away through the integration of incompatibles into an imaginative vision, the language will not be meaningful.

We can now understand formally the meaning provided by faith in this way: if these conditions are tacitly accepted, a believer can recognize the meaning of faith by dwelling in the heuristic vision it sustains.<sup>25</sup> When analyzed from the fundamental structures underlying an act of religious belief, the meaning of faith is formally found not in the comprehended content of an affirmation but in the act of worship itself.<sup>26</sup> This is to say that, by dwelling in a specific community of faith, a believer is "carried away" by its rites and symbols and "breaks out" toward the dimension of ultimacy portrayed in its heuristic vision. The properly religious "understanding" that results from faith is fundamentally proleptic, because the meaning faith supplies is causal in the sense that it draws the believer

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 266–67.

<sup>22</sup> *Meaning* 179–80.

<sup>23</sup> *The Tacit Dimension* 81. The context in which Polanyi is speaking is that of scientific discovery, but it is an equally appropriate description of the transition to religious indwelling.

<sup>24</sup> *Meaning* 74–75.

<sup>25</sup> *Personal Knowledge* 199.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 281.



into an ever-deepening relationship with the sacred. When formally analyzed in this way as an indwelling fostering a breaking out, religious expressions are, properly speaking, neither true nor false. The attempt to break out can only be genuine or hypocritical.

In fact, of course, there are no religions which are simply formal. Precisely because it is a heuristic vision, a particular religion must foster the prodigious effort of integrating everything in our experience into ultimate meaningfulness. The validity of any particular religious vision is thus dependent on its ability to integrate our lives meaningfully. Accordingly, there are innumerable subsidiary elements which mediate or are entailed in a particular religion's heuristic vision. Some of these may be crucial, such as privileged experiences, special events, formative doctrinal interpretations, or sacred texts. Others may be peripheral and can be discarded if necessary, as in the case of an outmoded cosmology. While an act of worship, formally considered, is neither true nor false, the vision which sustains it must be true in some sense; otherwise worshiping, even if authentic, is illusory. The task of analyzing the constituent features of a religious tradition and explaining how they may be truly integrated into the primary meaning of the religious vision is the role of theology.

## II

The development of the implications of Polanyi's analysis of human knowing in the first part of this essay has provided a formal account of the grounds for religious belief in terms of its foundations in human cognitive powers and, based upon this, in terms of the meaning tacitly held in the act of faith. We can now understand that faith is grounded in the dimension of ultimacy sustaining all our acts of knowing and that its meaning is provided by the profound integration, never fully specifiable explicitly, discerned in breaking out toward the sacred. Since this specifically religious meaning integrates subsidiary elements, questions may be raised both by believers within and critics outside the tradition concerning how or why certain of the subsidiary features are so integrated and whether they are legitimately integrated. In the West the task of confronting such questions has been performed by theologians.

The aim of this section is to offer an explanation of this process of theological inquiry which is adequate both to the structure of religious belief disclosed in the earlier analysis and to demands for integrity posed by contemporary culture. Such an endeavor is quite complex because of the interconnected levels of meaning which must be integrated by theological understanding. This proposal for understanding the fundamental structures which sustain theological inquiry will be based on Polanyi's analysis of the general conditions of human knowing, though adapted to the specific conditions related to religious belief. We will begin with some

preliminary clarifications on the levels of meaning which function in theological understanding. Sorting these out will assist us in our primary objective of demonstrating the validity of theological understanding through an analysis of the formal operations of knowing which sustain the theological enterprise as a quest for truth.

The PRIMARY SOURCE of meaning for theological understanding is derived from the encounter with the sacred experienced in breaking out. Yet this properly religious meaning, which is known tacitly in worship, is mediated to a community of belief through explicit expressions and actions which form subsidiary elements in its heuristic vision. These subsidiary elements, in their turn, are related to or derived from more common features of our experience. Insofar as they are so related, they have other meanings in addition to their reference to the sacred. As such, they are susceptible to analyses from perspectives other than the religious one and also may be capable of being integrated into world views differing from the heuristic vision of the religion. Briefly, then, theological understanding may be said to consist in analyzing such successive levels of meaning and explaining the validity of the corresponding degrees of integration.

If the earlier analysis of the structure of religious belief and the preceding schema of the levels of meaning operative in theological understanding are valid, then a fundamental presupposition of a properly theological inquiry is the dwelling in a religious tradition. Unless theological expressions are grasped as disclosing the implications of the heuristic vision sustaining them, the understanding provided by theology will appear to be meaningless or even self-contradictory.<sup>27</sup> Any attempt to understand theology outside this framework of meaning is bound to fail, because such an attempt would judge the validity of theological claims solely from the world circumscribed by observable experience which cannot integrate these subsidiary elements into the meaning provided by the experience of breaking out toward the sacred. The validity of the specifically religious import of any theological statement cannot be affirmed except by those who share the form of indwelling it is attempting to clarify.

Since this is a problematic claim in the context of the contemporary discussion on the foundations of theological inquiry, we should pause for a moment to consider the counterclaim that religious belief is not a constituent feature of the properly theological task. We will be aided in this by examining briefly what the two major reformulations of theology proposed by David Tracy and Wolfhart Pannenberg have to say on this point.

In his *Blessed Rage for Order* Tracy proposes a "revisionist" model of

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 282.

theology which critically correlates the two "sources" of theology, namely, the results of a phenomenological description of common human experience and language and the results of a hermeneutical investigation of the classical Christian texts, and determines the truth status of this investigation by means of a transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection.<sup>28</sup> Through the application of the criteria of meaningfulness (disclosive of authentic experience of ourselves), meaning (conceptual internal coherence), and truth (adequacy to experience as a condition of possibility), religious language and claims can be adjudicated.<sup>29</sup> The entire scheme is a well-wrought argument which envisions the foundations of theological inquiry as a purely conceptual analysis in which the meaning of a religious tradition is judged by its adequacy to be meaningful to the "limit-situation" of authentic secular experience. As such, the proposal requires no prior explicit faith in the tradition being analyzed.

A questionable presupposition of this proposal is that a conceptual extraction of the cognitive claims embedded in the symbolic language of religious faith is possible and can be done adequately.<sup>30</sup> From the perspective being advanced here, however, the major problem with the proposal is its further presupposition that someone who does not share the faith of the religious tradition can understand the meaning of its claims. In fact, Tracy is aware of this when he admits that a "preunderstanding" of the subject matter of religion is necessary.<sup>31</sup> What such a preunderstanding consists in is not clear, although it seems to include a secular faith in the worth of life and an openness to the limit-situations of our experience.<sup>32</sup> This still cannot account for the understanding of the properly religious claims of the tradition; for, as we have already seen, such an experience of a limit-situation or dimension of ultimacy is inherently ambiguous. If the limit-situation already has a positive significance for the inquirer, then the language used to describe it must be meaningful because of faith in the sense we have described earlier. If the limit-situation, on the other hand, has no positive significance, then the inquirer must view the language of the religious tradition from some vantage point which does not permit its specifically religious meaning to be disclosed. Since Tracy seems to presume the former case by his

<sup>28</sup> *Blessed Rage for Order* 43-56.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 71 for a summary statement.

<sup>30</sup> This is an issue to which Tracy is quite sensitive. Even though he clearly affirms that this can be done, he is cautious in this proposal; see *ibid.* 55, 108, 128, 142-43 n. 67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 36 n. 16, 251 n. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 187. Here Tracy indicates the important role that the notion of common secular faith plays in his position by stating that a person who lacks it poses a more radical problem for the theologian. Such a person is involved in "unfaith" and must be converted to a faith in the worth of human existence before theology can be existentially meaningful.

recognition of preunderstanding, it would appear that the point Tracy is trying to make for the foundations of his revisionist theology could be better made in some other way. We shall try to develop this possibility shortly.

In a similar manner, Pannenberg's *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* tries to outline the fundamental operations of theological inquiry so as to be distinguishable from the faith of the theologian.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Tracy, however, Pannenberg develops his conception of theology from the results of a monumental survey of the presuppositions of meaning and verification found in current philosophy of science and hermeneutic theory. This survey concludes with a unitary view of science wherein all meaning and judgments of truth are shown to operate within a totality of meaning, and disciplines differ from each other by the way they delimit their approach to meaning within this totality through their formal procedures.<sup>34</sup> In this sense theology can be understood to be a science insofar as it can verify any specific religious tradition's conception of God or the totality of reality as the all-determining reality in light of our present experience of the world. Religious claims thus function as hypotheses which "are to be judged by their ability to integrate the complexity of modern experience into the religion."<sup>35</sup>

With respect to our question concerning the role of faith in the formal procedures of theological inquiry, Pannenberg's proposal betrays an ambiguity, particularly in his discussion of the verification of theological claims. He admits that, while theological claims can be verified, such verification can never come to a final conclusion.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this is clear: since religious claims are about reality as a whole and we have only indirect access to it, a final verification is possible only at the end of all history, when this meaning has unfolded. Still, we must make judgments about reality as a whole now, and this is done insofar as the particular religious claims are judged by us to be validated by our experience. This is to say that "traditional statements or modern reformulations prove themselves when they give the complex of meaning of all experience of reality a more subtle and more convincing interpretation than others."<sup>37</sup> This appears to be another way of saying that because of faith a person is able to integrate the disparate features of existence in terms of the meaning tacitly known through the religious tradition and as a result judges the claims of the tradition to be true. On the other hand, if the person does not believe in the claims of the tradition, he cannot understand how they may integrate the disparate features of his existence and

<sup>33</sup> E.g., see Pannenberg's use of the distinction between the heuristic and the probative contexts of assertions in his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* 320-21.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 206-24.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 343.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 315.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

thus would judge these claims to be unsubstantiated. In either case the ability to understand the meaning of a religious tradition's claims provided by the experience of faith seems to be presupposed in judging the truth or falsity of these claims.

While this all too brief sketch does not resolve the problem of the role of faith in theological understanding, it does at least point to some inherent difficulties in both Tracy's and Pannenberg's proposals. Nevertheless, whatever extrinsic motives they may have had for excluding faith from their proposals for understanding theology,<sup>38</sup> we must acknowledge that what may have led them to such formulations are legitimate concerns intrinsic to theology. If the admission of faith into theology requires theology to operate in splendid isolation by explaining the subjective beliefs of the religious community without cognizance of the results of other fields of inquiry or accept unquestioningly the truth of the tradition within which it operates,<sup>39</sup> then clearly such a faith is an impediment to a genuine inquiry into truth. In this sense we can appreciate that their attempt to exclude faith from the constitutive conditions of theological inquiry stems from their desire to safeguard the integrity of theology. The problem, then, is not the intent of their proposals; rather, it is their adequacy on this point.

Our present task is to clarify our proposal for the constitutive role of faith in theological understanding. The preceding analysis explained how the dwelling in a religious tradition accounted for understanding the properly religious dimension of theological language in a way that we claimed Tracy's and Pannenberg's proposals could not. What is required next is that we explain how religious indwelling not only guides theological inquiry but also lets it be a *genuine inquiry*.

Polanyi's analysis of the role of authority in cultural traditions is crucial to this issue. Very early in the development of his thought he distinguished between specific and general authority, wherein the former laid down conclusions, whereas the latter laid down guidelines and demanded

<sup>38</sup> Since both Tracy and Pannenberg develop their proposals in the context of demonstrating the place of theology in the academic community (see *Blessed Rage for Order* 239 and *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* 4), such an extratheological concern may subtly influence their proposals toward the understanding of rationality presumed to be cherished by the academy. That is, the apparent demands of "secular knowledge" or "autonomous reason" could become the implicit but unexamined criterion of meaning for religious claims. For a further discussion of this possibility, see P. Berger, "Secular Theology and the Rejection of the Supernatural: Reflections on Recent Trends," *TS* 38 (1977) 39-56. See also the "Responses to Peter Berger" by Langdon Gilkey, Schubert M. Ogden, and David Tracy, *TS* 39 (1978) 486-507.

<sup>39</sup> Both Tracy and Pannenberg seem to fear that such presuppositions must inevitably surface if faith is admitted to be one of the foundational aspects of the structure of theological inquiry. See *Blessed Rage for Order* 25, 29 and *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* 227, 277, 319.

freedom in their exercise even to the point of altering or overturning the guidelines.<sup>40</sup> His later work developed these insights by using as a model the operation of the scientific community at work.<sup>41</sup> By dwelling in a scientific framework, a scientist submits to the authority embodied in the scientific community. This allows him to integrate disparate aspects of his experience into more complex coherences represented by scientific theories. Such integrations allow him to see new meanings in phenomena he simply could not discern before. Through his creative work he may also be able to relate additional features into such integrations, because he is also guided by his tacit foreknowledge of the real. When he believes he has successfully established a further specification of a coherence, or even discerned an entirely new coherence in nature, he affirms it with universal intent. If he is correct, scientists whose own work overlaps in his area will also come to understand and accept his discovery, and it will be accepted into the general body of scientific knowledge, to serve in its turn as an authoritative guideline.

Two features of this analysis are important for our consideration. The scientific community can serve as an authority to guide the individual only if the individual dwells in it. But through such indwelling the individual's understanding of reality is not only enhanced; it is also fostered to discover new, and perhaps more profound, aspects of reality.

This analysis, of course, is simply an amplification of our earlier discussion of the process of scientific discovery in the context of the validation of our claims to truth. The specific emphasis here, however, permits us to explain how a theologian must dwell in a religious community in order to discover the implications of its vision of reality. Because of his religious indwelling, a theologian tacitly accepts its authority by relying on its practice and language in the act of breaking out toward the sacred. He is, accordingly, enabled to experience tacitly the profound integration of the totality of reality provided by the encounter with the sacred. Moreover, precisely in the measure that his faith is creative, the theologian may discern more profound ways of integrating into the religious vision subsidiary elements of reality which develop or challenge previous theological integrations. As in the case of all heuristic visions, the theologian proposes his new insights with universal intent and the expectation that those in the theological community can come to understand them and accept their truth.

The point being made here is that, while the theologian's belief is a necessary guide for understanding the implications of his heuristic vision, it does not determine the results of his inquiry. On the contrary, his faith is the source of ultimate and proximate criteria of integration which guide

<sup>40</sup> *Science, Faith and Society* 59.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., see *The Tacit Dimension* 63-92 and *Meaning* 182-216.

him in discerning these new implications of the heuristic vision. Paradoxically, the breaking out toward the dimension of ultimacy fostered by the religious community also provides the criteria for a theologian to judge that the religion's implications cannot be integrated meaningfully into its heuristic vision, whereas an entirely different coherence (for example, a purely naturalistic one) is a more meaningful way of integrating the disparate features of reality. Since he could no longer share the form of indwelling fostered by the religious community, he likewise could not tacitly validate it by dwelling in the heuristic vision it sustains. As Polanyi's analysis clearly explains, such a "loss of faith" is actually a "conversion" to another form of indwelling which the person now tacitly has validated for himself by relying on its authority to guide his understanding of the totality of reality.

This implies that theological inquiry is "objective," but not in the sense that a theologian could assume some "neutral" stance outside the meaning disclosed through the heuristic vision of faith. Rather, theological objectivity can be understood in the sense that "we so submit ourselves to the dictates of the object that we think in terms of it, and not in terms of what we think we already know about it."<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the ultimate criterion for assessing the validity of a theological claim is necessarily tacit, because it must be judged on the basis of its adequacy for integrating its subsidiary elements into the meaning provided by the experience of the sacred. But, as our analysis at the beginning of this section indicated, these subsidiary elements which mediate the properly religious meaning may be understood through less comprehensive integrations. Here more proximate criteria can be explicitly developed by other disciplines. Theological reflection must utilize such proximate criteria by demonstrating that they function legitimately at the appropriate level of the theological integration. Our analysis of the formal procedures of thought which ground theological inquiry can now be completed by outlining how these several levels of meaning and their corresponding criteria relate to each other in theology.

Theological understanding unfolds through two complementary phases, the historical and the systematic, both of which are mediated by a foundational inquiry.<sup>43</sup> Foundational or fundamental theology examines the basic presuppositions about meaning, knowledge, and reality that

<sup>42</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University, 1969) 35.

<sup>43</sup> This is a commonly accepted view of theology which is probably implicit in Christianity even in the New Testament, and in any case has been explicitly developed since at least the time of Schleiermacher. Recent authors who have adopted some variation of this view include P. Tillich, K. Rahner, B. Lonergan, and D. Tracy. Its primary value here is simply that it provides a framework which assists in indicating the potential contribution that Polyanian insights may offer to theology for clarifying the various levels of meaning and their functioning.

operate, at least implicitly, in theology. Historical theology concerns itself with an understanding of the meanings implied in the theological integrations achieved during the previous development of the tradition. Systematic theology consists in expressing these implications for the present by a dialogue with contemporary cultural frameworks so that the meaning experienced in breaking out toward the sacred can be authenticated. In this mediated dual movement various levels of meaning are operating, all of which are integrated by the meaning derived from the religious indwelling. We can explain some of the major features of the levels of meaning and their appropriate criteria by examining briefly each of these facets of theological understanding.

Fundamental theology examines the presuppositions necessary for theological inquiry. In this task it explores levels of meaning which mediate faith, and consequently relies on proximate norms and criteria in addition to those tacitly held by faith. This investigation is thus accountable on these subsidiary levels. An explanation of religious belief must, therefore, be consistent within itself and with criteria for other kinds of knowledge. In the first part of this essay, for example, we attempted to explain how Polanyi's proposal for understanding human knowledge accounted for all our intelligible experiences, and also how it then demonstrated that faith was a meaningful possibility, that the meaning it might have could be integrated only by breaking out toward the dimension of ultimacy sustaining all our thought, and finally that this could be validated insofar as we judged that it in fact integrated all our experiences successfully. The proximate criteria guiding this formal description of faith were proposed by Polanyi. At this level of meaning, then, the proposal for understanding religious belief could be challenged by demonstrating how Polanyi's analysis failed to meet pressing criteria for understanding knowledge or how this use of Polanyi's insights failed to develop his thought consistently. Similar issues could be raised about the argument that faith is a constituent feature of theological understanding.

Further, an account of theological foundations must express the criteria for intelligently understanding the past expressions of the tradition and for correctly formulating its meaning today. Thus our subsequent analysis of historical and systematic theology will actually be an exercise in fundamental theology. Even though we will be examining these two phases of theology, we will be doing so from the vantage point of their fundamental operations, including the levels of meaning they integrate and criteria they use.

In the task of historical analysis, theological understanding comprises at least these levels of meaning: textual criticism, exegesis, historical



criticism, and historical theology. Since our understanding of the past is based on surviving records, a preliminary task for theological understanding is establishing what the text is and what the words of the text mean. At these levels the appropriate methods and criteria of textual criticism apply. Upon this basis the intention of the text must be interpreted. Here historical research attempts to determine the accuracy of the events to which the documents refer, the significance ascribed to these events by the witnesses, the assumptions of the cultural horizon within which these events are understood, and how these assumptions affected the interpretation afforded these events by the witnesses who dwelled in them. Historical criticism thus analyzes the text in terms of its own self-understanding and in its relationship to the broader cultural spectrum in which it is situated.

Insofar as it is dependent upon these levels of meaning, the historical phase of theological inquiry functions much like other empirical sciences in that the results of these inquiries serve as data. To this extent the primary meaning of a religious indwelling is dependent on factors which are open to investigation by certain explicit criteria. The theologian's recognition of the validity of his religious indwelling thus depends on whether the meaning of its heuristic vision can integrate the results of such research.

Nevertheless, it is clear that these preliminary levels of meaning, while they contribute significant subsidiary elements to theological understanding, do not, of themselves, provide criteria for assessing the properly religious meaning of the tradition. The reason for this is that the most that can be derived from inquiries into these levels of meaning is the recognition of clues which point to something beyond themselves and accordingly require a further integration. If the religious level of meaning is to be understood, therefore, the indwelling of faith must be accepted so that the results of the critical historical studies may in fact function as such clues illuminating the heuristic vision of faith. In the historical phase of its analysis, consequently, theological understanding requires the contribution of historical theology to complete its evaluation of the distinctively religious meaning of the tradition.

The properly theological phase of the historical inquiry, unfortunately, is complicated by the fact that the heuristic vision of the religious tradition was expressed through cultural forms we no longer share. By what criteria do we determine the properly religious significance of a claim made in a framework in which we do not dwell? How do we know, for example, that our reading of the New Testament is not confusing some aspect of its cultural world view with the genuinely religious meaning it claims to represent? Our analysis of the foundations of

historical theology must be extended to the hermeneutical question whereby we explain how theological affirmations made in different cultural contexts can be understood.<sup>44</sup>

Expressed in general terms, we can say that a person inquiring into the meaning of reality as it was perceived through a past cultural framework can come to understand it because an isomorphic relationship exists between his understanding of reality today and the understanding of reality as it was perceived through the past framework.<sup>45</sup> This does not mean that the frameworks themselves are related, nor that they share common assumptions, though they may. Rather, it means that just as a person then dwelt in his cultural framework in order to comprehend the real, so also a similar relationship obtains for a person who today dwells in a framework in order to understand an aspect of reality. Moreover, the distance that separates the two frameworks allows the inquirer to identify by means of carefully constructed criteria what the assumptions of the past age were. This, in turn, enables him to explain how he distinguishes between what was assumed as a means of expressing an affirmation about some aspect of reality and what was the intent of the affirmation. Because of this foundation in the structure of knowing, a historian can gradually come to dwell in a historical framework and understand the aspects of reality presumed to be disclosed by the presuppositions of that form of indwelling.

The significance of this for historical theology is that, because he shares in the same religious indwelling, the theologian can come to understand the meaning of the sacred implied by the text. Furthermore, he can formulate the criteria used in his reconstruction of the specifically religious intent of the text insofar as he explains how those aspects of the text which mediate it are to be integrated properly. Such a theological construction, then, must meet the criteria of a consistent application of a hermeneutical theory. The successful result of historical theology is a reconstructed integration of the subsidiary elements which formerly mediated the heuristic vision of the tradition.

Based on the clarifications derived from the historical phase of the inquiry, theological understanding moves into its systematic phase by

<sup>44</sup> The following analysis is based on Polanyian themes; it would be greatly enriched by incorporating insights provided by the hermeneutical theories of P. Ricoeur and H.-G. Gadamer, particularly insofar as they could provide specific criteria for assisting in such difficult judgments.

<sup>45</sup> For this notion, and a specific analysis of such a relationship between two contemporary frameworks, see B. Lonergan, "Isomorphism of Thomist and Scientific Thought," in *Collection*, ed. F. E. Crowe (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 142-51. For an example of Polanyi's reflections on this type of problem, see Lecture III of the *Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Phoenix edition, 1963).

formulating the meaning of its heuristic vision in terms of contemporary frameworks. Again the isomorphic relationship between various contemporary frameworks allows the theologian to assess them in relationship with each other and with the demands for faithfulness to the object of theological inquiry. As a result of such dialogical inquiry, the meaning of traditional claims framed in modes of expression no longer current will be recast. This activity leads to systematic formulations expressed in terms of prevailing thought patterns which serve as guides for a more adequate expression of the meaning of faith.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, systematic expressions of the meaning of faith are subject to explicit criteria insofar as they mediate subsidiary levels of meaning. Yet, because faith provides the believer with a tacitly known ultimate meaning, the theologian must also challenge contemporary assumptions where necessary. Even here, however, the theologian must rely on proximate criteria to show that the results of such challenges are more meaningful integrations of the subsidiary elements themselves.

A brief illustration of this will suffice for our purposes. The prestige and the authority of science reign supreme in contemporary Western culture. The world view projected by science has often been perceived to be in conflict with religious assumptions. But the "world" is not the direct object of our experience. This means that any world view presumed to be based on science is actually a construct of the creative imagination, and the coherence it claims to offer must be judged by criteria appropriate to such constructs.<sup>47</sup> A purely naturalistic view of the world can be said to be meaningful insofar as it can offer criteria for demonstrating its ability to integrate various subsidiary elements of our experience, including those discovered by science. The task of a theologian in this instance is to insist on pointing to more profound features of our experience which a naturalistic view cannot integrate according to its own criteria. In this way a theologian can articulate an understanding of "creation" which satisfies criteria relating to science but which also satisfies other criteria of human significance that demonstrate the more profound integration possible through understanding the "world" in terms of creation. Theologically, then, such a construction proposed by the theologian would not only satisfy criteria from the religious level of meaning; it would also satisfy criteria from subsidiary levels of meaning.

When the properly religious level of meaning is at issue, however, all attempts at systematic formulations pose inherent difficulties. The ultimate presuppositions of our contemporary cultural frameworks are

<sup>46</sup> *Personal Knowledge* 282-83.

<sup>47</sup> *Meaning* 104. For a theological reflection which offers criteria for such imaginative construction, see Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*.

known only tacitly, since we rely on them in our affirmations about reality. The meaning of faith discerned in breaking out toward the sacred is also known tacitly in the integration of all our experience. In the final analysis, then, the ultimate justification of a theological proposal is the tacit criterion of its capacity to integrate all that is significant for our present experience into the absolutely meaningful coherence discerned in the encounter with the sacred. Having become convinced that his systematic reflections validly achieve such an integration, the theologian affirms his results with universal intent and with the expectation that those in the theological community can come to accept the main features of his proposals and the arguments offered to sustain them.

The result of this analysis of the fundamental structures of our cognitive powers which sustain theology allows us to conclude that theology is a genuine inquiry when it is successfully integrative. It attempts to integrate the meaning of faith of a religious tradition with the disparate aspects of reality disclosed through contemporary cultural frameworks by showing that its heuristic vision can provide the ultimate coherence for our present experience of reality. Dwelling in the religious tradition does not guarantee the success of this inquiry. Only if the theologian's integrative proposal provides an actual experience of the tacitly known coherence, and only if the proposal is accepted by the members of the religious community for discovering more profound implications of their experience of the sacred, can the effort be deemed successful. Integrative theological formulations bear the mark of all true discoveries: they are judged to be true because they adequately disclose an aspect of reality which may reveal itself in new and unexpected ways in the future. The principal value of theological inquiry, therefore, is the profundity of its integration; for it is in this way that the implications of faith are discovered and that the community of believers lives more truly what it affirms tacitly.

The aim of this essay has been to propose an understanding of theology as a genuine inquiry into truth based on Polanyian insights. It demands that theology be understood as a collaborative effort performed by a community of scholars inquiring into the truth disclosed by their religious indwelling. It further entails that theology be genuinely ecumenical,<sup>48</sup> in

<sup>48</sup> While this proposal has been developed with a view to understanding Christian theology, its logic clearly demands a dialogue with the world religions, insofar as in the contemporary world they must somehow be integrated meaningfully into any theological system. No attempt has been made here to indicate the procedures that might operate in such an effort at interreligious dialogue. Further reflections along Polanyian lines would undoubtedly prove fruitful here, particularly insofar as the issue of the truth claims of the various traditions may be fairly formulated as the ability to integrate the subsidiaries of contemporary experience into the heuristic vision promoted by the religion.

that all religious claims, including the subsidiary elements which mediate them, are subject to the test of being integrated validly into the heuristic vision sustaining the religion. In such a context, then, this proposal for understanding theology as integrative is also offered in the hope that it provides a significant contribution to the current discussion concerning theological foundations.