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**POLANYI'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE
FOR THEOLOGY**

Language and Its Relation to Reality

Why should we entrust the guidance of our thoughts and actions to our own conceptions? We do so, says Polanyi, because, although these are our creation, we believe their rationality is due to their being in contact with some aspect of reality. We are therefore prepared to be guided by them, though we are also prepared to reshape them, because we believe that we, too, have direct contact with reality. As persons, we engage in a life-long dialectical process in which we establish the meaning of words and form or modify our conceptual framework. We ourselves are changed by the transformation in our way of thinking.

The view that words are just conventions originated in the tradition of nominalism, which teaches that general terms are merely names, designating similar collections of objects. This theory treats language as an arbitrary human creation, whose meanings derive from the persons who invent them rather than from the reality to which they refer. Nominalism severs the bond between thought and its subject matter, between meaning and reality and establishes a merely external relationship between words and that to which they refer. Such a theory cannot, as Polanyi points out, account adequately for the power exercised by words over our thoughts or how the same term can mean something different in different contexts. Treating words as conventions is like treating scientific theories as convenient ways of viewing the data, but that tell us nothing about real relations. The tendency to treat the theoretical dimension as purely subjective and not derivable from empirical data goes together with distrust of metaphysics and reluctance to accredit the term 'reality' with meaning. Words change their meaning, but this is not because they are empty conventions. It is because we make fresh discoveries about the real world through our contact with it. We can never be 100% sure of the truth of our beliefs, but when we act 'as if they were true, there is trust or commitment behind the 'as if, and we would not hold them if we thought they were false.²

Polanyi denounces evasion of commitment to the truth of our theories and concepts on the grounds that science is about achieving contact with reality and that to refuse to regard its interpretative policies as true denies science access to reality. On his view, positivism

¹ PK 103-105.

² See PK 307.

does for science what nominalism does for language. It sets a great divide between meaning and reality, between theory and substance. It identifies objective reality with the material world and dismisses thought and meaning as pure subjectivity. This effectively reduces language to conventional status and diminishes our respect for it.

Language is a priceless gift, but its use exposes us to the danger of allowing words and thoughts to fall apart and increases the risk of false interpretation. When this happens, our articulate framework no longer agrees with our tacit understanding. The advantage of articulating thought far outweighs the disadvantages, but words imply generalisations, which constitute a theory of the universe, and we need periodically to ask whether the terms we use have had their meaning shaped by the realities we experience, or whether they are imposing on experience some alien or outdated theoretical interpretation.

Polanyi sees language as having not only referential or denotative power, but also anticipatory and heuristic value. According to him, reality is rich in unexpected possibilities for the future. He writes,

When we believe that we have truly designated something real, we expect that it may yet manifest its effectiveness in an indefinite and perhaps wholly unexpected manner. This intension comprises a range of properties which only future discoveries may reveal - confirming thereby the Tightness of the conception conveyed by our term. (PK 116)

The evolutionary process is essentially exploratory. Animals investigate their physical surroundings. But the world explored by humans is infinitely more meaningful than it is for creatures whose discoveries are limited to what they perceive with their senses. Language enables humans to live immersed in a world of thought, including literature, the arts, science, religion and a host of cultural and technical accomplishments. The power to think and articulate thought has moved persons out of the biosphere into the noosphere - a dwelling place of the mind, that lifts them onto a plane that is spiritual, rather than material.

Persons can anticipate the future and formulate problems. Life's problems seldom admit of a systematic solution. Some problems arise, as Polanyi suggests, out of an intellectual desire that postulates the existence of that which can satisfy it. It is the intensity of our desire and preoccupation with a problem that stimulates our imagination and generates our power to reorganise thought successfully and to find the right words in which to express it. The use of apposite language aids our understanding of particular realities and situations and, like a true theory, helps us to form right conceptions and come to right conclusions.

It is when we recognise enduring meaning (significant pattern), that we experience contact with reality. Conversely, if we deny the objectivity of meaning, we lose the ability to believe in reality and also in metaphysics. People who claim to be realists do not, on the whole, find thoughts and minds as real as bodies, even though they believe in the inherent meaningfulness of the world and try to hold meaning and reality together. Polanyi's kind of realism is personalist in the sense that he accepts the principle that meaning and reality are inseparable. His metaphysic is of the 'both-and' kind, which allows meaning embodiment

in non-tangible forms as well as in tangible objects. A meaning may be enshrined in a concept or a metaphor, in a poem, a story, a symphony. In each case, the meaning and the reality are indivisible. Reality is embodied meaning. But meaning may be articulated in many different ways and have many kinds of embodiment.

Polanyi is clear that the 'body' which articulates meaning need not be material. As William Temple once said, the important thing is the meaning articulated, not the vehicle, or the nature of the 'body' that enshrines meaning. In persons, mind and body are united. Polanyi sometimes speaks of the mind as the meaning of the body, in the sense that the body articulates the person, who is a 'field of meaning', with a distinctive identity, a 'word' that can be 'read' by others. Each person articulates his or her own meaning by means of bodily action, by thought and speech, but no-one ever achieves complete identity of inner and outer relations in the sense, for example, attributed by Christians to Jesus, who was said, in his total person, to be the message that he proclaimed. (Many Christians view him as both the revelation [Word] and the reality [Being] of God. See later Sections on 'Perichoretic Logic and Language'.)

Communication: a 'Triad of Triads'

In Polanyi's theory of language, our conceptions, the words we use and the reality we seek to communicate form a triad. Polanyi calls the process of communication 'a triad of triads'. One basic triad consists of the knowing mind, the reality perceived and the conception formed as the meaning of this reality takes shape in the mind. Another triad consists of partners in dialogue united by shared thought. A third is formed by the speaker, the reality to be communicated and the language that functions as 'go-between'. Yet another triad consists of the self who communicates, the hearer who receives the communication and the words through which thought is mediated. In communication, the speaker endows words with meaning and the recipient of his message hears or sees the reality expressed in symbol and converts it back into meaning by forming an imaginative construct. The act of comprehending is always an act in which we dwell in the subsidiary particulars (visual clues, tools, language, etc.) and employ them to attend to their focal meaning. In conversation, we do this all the time, endowing our utterances with meaning and attributing meaning to the speech of others. Polanyi refers to these complementary patterns of activity involved in communication as 'sense-giving' and 'sense-reading'.

The Christian doctrine of resurrection provides an interesting example of the idea that the 'body' which articulates meaning need not be material. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul likens the physical body that dies to a seed sown. That which is raised after death is a 'spiritual body'. Christians understand this to mean that the pattern of energy and meaning (the self) that experiences death is in some way preserved. This is because we distinguish the essential self (its meaning) from its physical vehicle.

⁴ KB 185.

⁵ KB Chapter 12.

If we regard the basic unit of [person.il](#) being as 'being-in-relation' (an 'I-Thou' relationship - to use Martin Buber's terminology), this relation can also be seen as triadic, since that which links the 'I' and the 'Thou' has substance or ontological weight (Buber's 'sphere of the Between'). This 'Between', which links persons-in-relation, may be a wordless flow of energy. But in conversation, language becomes the link (the 'go-between'). The field image formed by this picture reminds us that persons are both separated and united by relationship. The 'I' and the 'Thou' form the terms between whom an exchange takes place. In the broadest sense, the 'Thou' represents the 'world' of the self-world relation - the total 'environment' of which each personal 'I' is a part and in which it participates. The process of becoming a person depends crucially on a capacity to relate in an open two-way relationship of perceiving, understanding and communicating (including appropriate acting). In this threefold process, perceptual, conceptual and imaginative elements are all at work.

We create meaning by 'dwelling' in the world we already know and by reaching forward to the world we do not yet know. Present knowing is constitutive of our being and of the language we use, since it charges our words with meaning and recharges them with fresh meaning as consciousness expands and new insights are assimilated. When a new meaning (reality) is experienced, a conception is born in the mind of the knower, who looks for a word that can represent the pattern of meaning or reality disclosed. The relation constituted by this event is triadic, since the reality and its meaning subsist in the participatory act of the knowing person. Understanding depends on the integration of clues and a conceptual re-organisation, which brings insight on a new logical plane. This act of tacit inference is not a formally logical performance. As Polanyi says, the process of articulating knowledge has the same dynamic and triadic structure as the act of tacit inference.

Language, the reality to which it refers and the knowing mind form an irreducible triad. By dwelling imaginatively in the shared symbols of language, partners in conversation can share their thinking and so participate in each other. In a sense, the whole person is indivisibly present in his speaking. Equally, there is a sense, in which the whole person is received by the one who hears his words. The perichoretic principle that 'each is in all' applies, therefore, also to the words that embody the meaning each shares with the other.

Perichoresis, Understood Theologically

The logic of perichoresis (mutual exchange) is, to my mind, so important for an understanding of personal structures that I want at this point to make a digression. In Christian theology, the doctrine of the Trinity refers to the internal relations within the Godhead and implies that the life of each 'Person' of the Godhead is what it is in virtue of what it receives from and gives to the other 'Persons'. The idea of 'perichoresis' was developed by the Church Fathers as part of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their problem was: how to affirm the

See *Between Man and Man*, Fontana Edition, 1961.

See *Knowing and Being*, Chapters 10 and 12.

divine 'Sonship' of Jesus, making him one with God and at the same time affirm God's Oneness. Theologically, talk about threeness and oneness has nothing to do with the logic of 'number'. The idea that God is triune is a way of saying that ultimate reality is personal and that personal being is relational being - fully individual and fully social. It is an attempt to convey a new concept of nature of 'Being'. It says something, first about God, and then about human beings who are in God's image. It tells us that the individual social relation within the Godhead is constitutive of personal being and that the individual exists within the community and forms part of it, while remaining fully an individual 'self'.

The doctrine of the Trinity, on its own, tends to give the impression that Christians worship three gods and are not true monotheists. To avoid misunderstanding, the Church Fathers developed the doctrine of perichoresis (or coinherence), which stands for the principle that 'each shares the life of all' in a mutual exchange of awareness and energies. In fact, I believe that this principle of exchange lies at the heart of the logic of personal being and that the doctrine of the Trinity should never be taught without reference to 'perichoresis', which concerns the nature of relations within the Godhead. It implies that the life of each 'Person' of the Godhead is what it is in virtue of what it receives from and gives to the other 'Persons'.

The choice of 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit' to designate the three 'Persons' of the Godhead has a historical explanation and there is no theological ground for taking these words literally. We continue to use them largely because we have, at present, no better symbols to put in their place, but they refer to the deepest mystery of 'Being' and represent a far from adequate way of speaking about the nature of God and of the relation between God and his 'creation'.

The doctrine of perichoresis is saying that the 'Father' is 'Father' because of his relation to the 'Son'. The 'Son' is 'Son' because of his relation to the 'Father'. All that the Son is is present in the being of the Father, through the Spirit. They are fully One with the oneness of mutual indwelling - a perfect 'I-Thou' unity. But for such a union to be possible, there must be a 'go-between' to provide both the uniting principle and the 'personal space' that ensures that the union of 'Father' and 'Son' is 'without confusion or separation'. Theologically, the Spirit represents all that the Father is and all that the Son is (without confusion or separation), yet having his own identity as a 'Person' of the Godhead. The picture is irreducibly triune. If there were no Spirit, there would be no Father or Son. If there were no Father or Son, there would be no Spirit. Each depends for being and identity on the shared life of the Whole, but the mystery of the relation lies in the simultaneous operation of total mutual dependence and genuine Subjecthood; that is, on the fact that each has something unique to give and to receive from each.

Perichoresis: A Principle of Personal Being

The perichoretic principle was discovered in connection with the need to establish and clarify the nature of relations within the Godhead, but it would, if Polanyi's epistemological and ontological analysis is correct, be paradigmatic of a principle at work in all the triadic structures, which his analysis reveals. It is clear from Polanyi's theory of language and communication that the goal of communication is to share, not words, but personal knowledge. Words convey information, but the communicating person communicates himself and the one who receives this communication participates in both the reality communicated and the inner being of the communicator, which results in mutual indwelling.

In all communication there is a) personal agency, b) the inner concept and c) the outer expression. The speaker is subsidiarily aware of the meaning he wishes to share and also of the language needed to express it. Both lie in subsidiary awareness and he attends from these clues to the message he intends to utter and is aware of a difference between his meaning and the words he uses to express it. Words and concepts are different kinds of reality. Meaning in the mind and words are related, but not identical. However well I express myself, what I know tacitly - the tacit component - is not co-extensive with the words which carry my meaning. To articulate what I know is to make explicit only part of what is in consciousness. But in this process, there is a perichoretic circulation of life and a mutual enrichment - of experience by language, of language by conceptions and of conceptions by both experience and language.

Speech is an enriching activity, because language helps to sharpen the meaning of experience. Listening and the act of making sense also form a triadic pattern. "The relation of a word to that which it denotes", writes Polanyi, "is established by a tacit integration in which we rely on a subsidiary awareness of the word for directing attention to its meaning." This process of integration is regarded by Polanyi as both a skilful and a logical operation, because the clues (words) enter into a procedure of tacit inference, with integration replacing deduction. The words function subsidiarily and bear on a focus, which results in the establishment of new meaning. The hearer relies on language known tacitly and his powers of integration enable him to 'go beyond' the specific evidence. As said earlier, the subsidiary particulars (the words) and the focal whole (the message) do not form a formally logical relation, but 'sense reading' is both a rational act and an act of self-transcendence, which involves a leap across a 'logical gap', because what is comprehended (the message) can never logically be derived from the data (the words). They belong to different logical levels and the relation is established with the aid of creative imagination.

Another irreducible triad is formed by the self, its world and its means of self-expression. Knowledge starts as an unaccountable apprehension of a meaningful pattern in reality,

which we seek to articulate. Words are tools used to communicate what we want to say, but meaning does not inhere in the word, but in the reality designated. Words become meaningful only when we look through the sound to the reality or state of affairs they denote. Yet meaning is inseparable from its embodiment. For example, a play or a symphony is its own meaning in virtue of its expression. It can be viewed as an elaborate 'word' - a means of saying something that cannot be taken apart. One cannot say what is the meaning of a Shakespeare sonnet or a Bach Cantata, except by reciting or performing it. The meaning requires for its expression the whole work of art. In the same way, a person indivisibly embodies his or her own meaning and the words used are part of the person who speaks them. The principle of coinherence (perichoresis) has an application to this triadic relation between the knower, the known and the meaning that comes to expression in virtue of what is known. This dialectic has, I believe, been at work from the beginning in some form throughout the whole network of relations that comprise life's evolutionary advance.

Perichoretic Logic and Language Viewed as a Sacrament

Language is a 'go-between', which enables persons-in-relation to participate in each other and share the same 'personal' space. According to perichoretic logic, that which passes 'between' is the means where each enriches and is enriched by the other in an endless mutual exchange. For Christians, this describes the inner life of the Trinity. It can also be a way of understanding the nature of the Incarnation. The historical Jesus seems to have been aware of being 'host' to God and of enjoying a quality of communion with him that enabled them to be uniquely 'one'. This experience in his inner being of constant exchange and mutual indwelling enabled the human Jesus to say 'I and my Father are One'. 'I do only those things that I see the Father doing'.

My understanding of this is that the total obedience of Jesus and his complete surrender to the will of God gave God unique and total 'personal' space to reveal himself 'in the flesh' to mankind. In the body of Jesus, the 'Father' and the 'Son' enjoyed a lifetime of perfect inner union. This would justify the early Church describing Jesus as 'the Word' (Logos) of God, the one whose life was God revealing himself to the human race. Just as we pour ourselves into our words, so God poured himself out to the world in Jesus. Such a view would also justify the claim, central to Christianity, that Jesus is unique, though his uniqueness does not prevent him from being described as 'the first-born among many brethren'.

If we apply the logic of perichoresis to human relations, we are under pressure to give our words, which fulfil a mediating role, the same reverence and respect we accord to ourselves and to our partners in conversation. Theologians were under this kind of pressure when they gave to the Holy Spirit the full personal status they accorded to the 'Father' and the 'Son' and proclaimed him the third 'Person' of the Godhead. Their logic is akin to Buber's, who felt impelled to give ontological weight to the sphere of the 'Between', on the grounds that it must necessarily embody all that it mediates in both directions.

Romans 8: 29; cf. Hebrews, Chapter 2.

Viewed in this way, language becomes a kind of sacrament. We pour ourselves into our words and hold ourselves responsible for judging their fitness. Though words are symbols which we have contrived, they have a life of their own, which must be respected. On the one hand, words are never independent of the speaker, but on the other, they relate to the reality they denote. In this way, they unite in themselves the subjective and objective poles of truth and, in conversation, they embody and communicate some truth about reality as well as enabling each partner in dialogue to participate in the other.

Language, then, is both a sacrament of truth and an extension of personhood, whose emergence in the course of the evolutionary process has depended very largely on the hard-won gift of speech. Language is the correlate of creaturely awareness of the external world. Our rich linguistic heritage is the result of our forbears' passionate concern to explore and understand the world and to act appropriately in it. The fact that we have a language apposite to experience is the fruit of human determination to hold meaning and reality together and to create a vocabulary rich enough to communicate experience and debate its meaning. This concern with the meaning of reality is a concern for truth.

Language, Truth and Society

Language is a powerful tool, but if it is not used with integrity and in the service of truth, it gives rise to grave abuses. Without a concern for truth, society becomes corrupt and culture falls into decay. Language is the first casualty when love of truth is absent. The second casualty is community, because when language is no longer the coinage of truth, relationships break down. We are quick to notice inconsistency and dishonest use of language in those whose actions do not match their words and condemn it as hypocrisy or deception. When language is used manipulatively, words become false witnesses and persons become deceivers and victims of the lies and false interpretations of others. In this situation, the worlds of thought and things fall apart and mutual trust is destroyed.

We may call this 'mental sickness', but the deliberate misuse of language is a symptom of wrong orientation, of a lack of commitment to the 'whole' of which one is a 'part'. This makes for a 'sick' society, but it does not absolve the individual from blame. Speaking truth may be partly a social convention, but few individuals have a clear conscience when using language dishonestly. In most cultures, truth-telling has a positive valuation and has to do with personal integrity and social responsibility. It is important for persons to mean what they say, because it is the whole person who articulates meaning. A person and his words are indivisible, because it is the person *in toto* who constitutes a unique, living 'word', albeit a growing, changing word - a word of response to the 'Logos' of the universe, who stands as the ultimate 'Thou' over against all who say T.

To sum up, language is not just a tool. It is, in effect, part of the person, to be used as we use our body in expressing our 'meaning' with integrity. To use it as a social convenience is a form of prostitution. Language has given persons the creative freedom to become fully personal, providing it is used in a spirit of responsible stewardship. To abuse language is to

violate personhood, particularly in its social and relational aspect. To speak a lie is part of living a lie. It allows meaning and reality to fall apart and creates an unreal world where mutual trust is impossible and the concepts of meaning and reality cease to have currency. A healthy society can only exist where truth is revered and where words are spoken in good faith and reflect the truth as understood and experienced. Polanyi has much to say about the free society and the conditions in which it can flourish democratically. He takes his model from the international scientific community, which survives and flourishes only where truth is valued and where there is mutual trust and acceptance of certain self-set standards. Only within such conditions is there freedom to pursue truth and to welcome new knowledge as it reveals itself. Insincerity represents a violation of a basic law of personal being, because it destroys the bond between what one is in one's inner being (ontology) and what one is in one's outer relations (epistemology).

'Logos' versus 'Number' Rationality

Science is concerned with generalisation and prediction, and some scientists hope eventually to be able to express the relations between the forces and elements that structure the universe in a single, universal equation. Such a formulation will, if achieved, be rational thinking of a kind that radically reduces and simplifies basic concepts and relations. But theology is concerned with a kind of rational thinking that depends on understanding the inner meaning of existence. Scientific formulae are about the real world, but tell us nothing about the world experienced by persons, or about the meaning of life. The impersonal rationality of science might be called 'number' rationality, whereas the rationality we need for interpreting a personal world has reference to values as well as 'bare facts' and might be called 'logos' rationality.

Our critical faculty can only operate within a rational framework that structures our thinking and helps us to interpret experience. Even a poem, a metaphor, or a story can function as a framework, in the sense of constituting a unitary experience which provides a particular 'sub-rationality' within a more inclusive world view. The essence of a poem is achieved by reading it whole, dwelling in it, and letting it speak. Concepts can be quite complex patterns of meaning. The unit of linguistic meaning is not the word, but the message, and the art of reading sense into words is to recognise that they have both particular application and universal significance. A single concept may even govern the way we think about our world. For example, the concept of 'machine' provided Newton with a conceptual model that governed the way he thought about the universe. Today, there is a tendency to think of our world, and the system of which it is part, as being a living organism rather than a mechanism and to take our conceptual model from biology.

A persuasive case for this is made by Jim Lovelock in *Gaia*.

Christianity finds its conceptual model for the created order, not in the impersonal rationality of mathematics, nor in the slightly less impersonal rationality of biology, but in the fully personal rationality of 'anthropology'. That is to say, it claims that Jesus, the human 'Son of God', is God's 'Word' (Logos), and that he provides the logic, or pattern of meaning, we need in order to make sense of our world. To put it in Christian theological terms, the rationality that ultimately governs our world and its relation to God is that of divine 'Sonship'. This is the interpretative framework (paradigm) we need to 'indwell' in order to be able to interpret our experience aright and to act appropriately in the world. The classic formulation of this idea is to say that the 'cosmic Christ' provides the key to the meaning of the universe. This means following the way of 'divine sonship', relating to God in trust and obedience and accepting the 'Word made flesh' as a living paradigm, allowing 'Him' to shape our thoughts and guide our actions. The pattern of life, death and resurrection revealed in the life of Christ provides the key, not only to fully personal existence, but also to an understanding of the story of creative evolution and how persons came to emerge from this self-transcending, dialectical movement.

Internal and External Relations

What has this discussion about rationality and ways of interpreting our experience to do with Polanyi's theory of language? Polanyi's metaphysic and his theory of personal knowledge developed together and provide the needed philosophical tools for thinking in a unitary and personalist way about opposites and about relations such as that of God and the world, which otherwise appear to be contradictory incompatibles. I have tried to show that Polanyi's theory of language represents words as participating in the reality they denote as well as in the person who utters them. This view is grounded in the idea that knowing is a mode of being, which makes it necessary to accredit the bond between what a thing is in its inner being and what it is in its external relations. Polanyi's theory of language is grounded in his personalist metaphysic, which does not allow meaning and reality to fall apart. This is important for theology and especially for the doctrine of the incarnation, which understands the life of Jesus to be God speaking his 'Word', communicating with mankind, not indirectly and externally, but directly, in a personal presence.

The Western Church, influenced by Greek dualism, allowed itself to think of God communicating with us, not directly in his own intelligible internal relations, but indirectly and externally. This way of thinking affected Christian thought in two ways. One stream tended to identify the Word of God with his indwelling Spirit - the Spirit of truth that illuminates the soul, like the inner light of the Quakers. The problem with this view is that the 'inner light' is indistinguishable from the subjective structures of the self, and the objective pole of religion is too easily swallowed up in subjectivity or becomes a form of purely 'natural theology'. The other stream tends to equate truth with an objective corpus

of 'revealed' propositions and the soul's relationship with God is depersonalised. No longer is 'the Word' experienced as God communicating himself as a personal presence and source of grace, mediated through the world of Nature and persons. In effect, the subjective and objective elements in knowing are polarised and depersonalised and a wedge is driven between so-called natural and revealed theology.

If we set these problems in the light of Polanyi's 'triadic' theory of language and communication, the polarisation is overcome, and the God-world relation is restored to a unitary, interpersonal and triadic perspective. Subjectively, we receive God's Word, mediated through 'natural' experience of some kind, but discerned and interpreted with a measure of rational, yet creative autonomy. Objectively, God's Word confronts us as something that transcends all subjectivity and 'natural' knowledge. Transposed into terms of reason and revelation, we 'experience' a 'revelation' of God, because we not only work with the data of 'natural' experience, we also integrate that data to form a new meaning that transcends logic and brings us to awareness of truth on a different logical plane. This is tacit inference, seeking to interpret the natural world and all history in the light of the 'supernatural', 'Logos' rationality, that structures the cosmos. Expressed theologically, this means that we may not do 'natural' theology in isolation from 'revealed' theology. It must be done within the interpretative framework of our basic (faith) presuppositions - which traditionally we call 'revelation'.

Polanyi's way of putting this would be to say that the Christian sees the world within a framework provided by the 'Logos' paradigm and fits the clues of experience into this overall gestalt or pattern. This would mean interpreting history and Nature in the light of the 'Logos' principle, whose rationality derives from God as he is in his own internal relations. Polanyi points out that our presuppositions are, in the end, a matter of personal judgement, for which we must take responsibility; but part of the quest for truth is to strive for a rational scheme appropriate to the subject matter and to make commitment to such a framework.

Christians believe that God and his Word are indivisible. Expressed theologically, God is one in Being and Agency, one in Person and Word, one in Thought and Act. When he acts in self-revelation, he is himself his own self-revealing 'Word'. Christians believe that, in the Incarnation, God expresses and reveals himself, not through the words of a prophet, but directly in the pattern of a holy life, a forgiving death and a healing resurrection. This pattern is uniquely particular, yet also universally significant, because it represents the union of God and man, of the 'One' and the 'many', sharing the same 'personal space', though not existing on the same logical level. In this union, through mutual indwelling, the particular, historical Jesus represents the individual pole and God, the 'Word incarnate', represents the universal pole of this prototypical 'I-Thou' relation.

This, as I understand it, is the Barthian position, which holds that all natural knowledge of God must be pursued within a framework of Christian revelation and interpreted in the light of the 'rationality' provided by Christ.

At the heart of personal being is a unity in community which constitutes the basic 'I-Thou' unit of personal being. This is also the meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity. Although this doctrine has existed for many centuries, Christians are only gradually coming to suspect that God's triune Being is definitive of the structure of created personal being and that the secret of the 'Incarnation' may be that, in Jesus' own inner life, there is a perfect 'I-Thou' union with God, whose incarnate presence is secured through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To speak of 'incarnation' is a way of affirming that in Jesus, there was a life-long union of the uncreated God and created humanity. In other words, Jesus provided a 'body' in which his own and God's historical existence could be lived out in total harmony. Because the human will of Jesus was united with the will of God in perfect obedience, the 'Father' could share the 'personal space' as well as the 'flesh' of the 'Son' in an inner mutual relation of perfect 'I-Thou' union.

This, as I understand it, is the miracle of the Incarnation according to Christianity. This is why Christians claim that Jesus was unique and could say "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" without being guilty of blasphemy or gross arrogance. If Jesus was God's living, self-revealing 'Word', it is not only because his human will was in total harmony with the Father's will. It is also because there is no disjunction between what God is in his inner being and what he becomes in his external relation to the world. God is not one thing in his speaking and another in his being. The living 'Word' which God spoke externally through 'the Son' was a relation of inner identity with the 'Father'.

One can say with reasonable certainty that no human being has ever achieved complete identity of inner and outer relations in the sense we attribute to God and in the sense many people attribute to Jesus. But the claim that Jesus *was* his message must not be confused with the claim that lies behind the doctrine of the incarnation. The latter claim is usually understood to mean that, in his total person, Jesus was both the revelation (Word) and the reality (Being) of God. The God who identified with the particular, historical, Jewish human person called Jesus, who lived, died and was raised to new life in him, was also the God whom no man hath seen at any time'. The God who shared with Jesus the 'personal space' of his inner being was also the God to whom Jesus prayed as 'Father' and the One who raised him to life after death.

Persons are, so the Bible says, in the image of God. This means that each and all can relate to God, the ultimate 'Thou' and share the experience of mutual indwelling, that Jesus spoke of to his disciples. It also means that we are empowered to do those things we associate with personal being. Persons live immersed both in the world of thought and in the physical world. They interiorise the world by identifying patterns of meaning and by naming them in acts of commitment and participation. Persons also speak on behalf of the world of which they are part. The mind, as Polanyi says, is the meaning of the body, which

¹³ John 17: 21.

articulates the person, who is a self-revealing 'word', read by others. Persons can participate in the lives of others with redemptive power, but only if their words and actions reflect what they know and are. Only in God is there complete coincidence of act and being, of inner and external relations. But as persons, we must aim to make identity of speech and being **our** ideal.

A New **Kind of 'Explicit' Knowledge**

There is one final point I would like to make about Polanyi's theory of language. Not only does his triadic view of the structure of language illuminate the inner relation that focuses the mystery of 'God incarnate', but his use of the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge illuminates the doctrine of revelation and reconciliation. Before the coming of 'the Word made flesh', knowledge of God seemed to be a tacit, non-articulated kind of knowledge lacking clarity and concreteness of definition. In the past, God had spoken to mankind in many ways and through many media. But in the incarnation, he spoke in the language of personhood and the relation between God and his 'Word', between inner and outer, between tacit and explicit, became one of identity in a radically new way. When God became incarnate, it was as if a new 'explicit' language was born, releasing in those who heard and received it a new inner power to express the gospel, not just verbally, but in act and being. This 'explicit' knowledge of God gave persons the power to articulate his love through transformed lives and to communicate it more sharply in terms of personal relationship and community. The knowledge of God brought by this revelation had power fully to reconcile and fully to transform, because it was carried by a 'living Word', representing an identity of inner and outer relations. People who heard this 'Word' were not just hearing words, which in themselves do not transform, but were being invited to participate in the inner life of the 'Word incarnate'.