



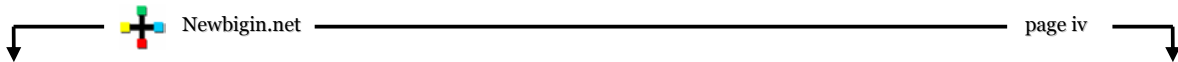
Foreword

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*J.E. Lesslie Newbigin*

*In Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi, Revised Edition, by Drusilla Scott, pp. iv-v. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.*

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I am very thankful that Drusilla Scott's admirable introduction to the work of Michael Polanyi is again to be available after a period in which it was out of print. I believe that Polanyi's work is of great importance, not least to those who are trying to commend the Christian faith to a sceptical generation. But his major work *Personal Knowledge* is not easy reading, and Lady Scott has given us the essentials of his thought in a form which is much more accessible to the reader who is not a trained scientist. Polanyi was not, of course, writing a work of Christian apologetics: he was concerned about the threat to the future of our culture, and to the future of science in particular. But his work is of the greatest significance to Christians.

One of the most widely read books of the 1980s was Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, with its picture of an intellectual world from which the concept of truth had disappeared, a world where one speaks only of 'What I feel', of 'experience' rather than of truth, of what is the case. How does one commend the Gospel as truth in a world from which the very idea of truth has disappeared? Polanyi, as a scientist engaged in fundamental research, was forced to face this issue by his encounters with scientists of the USSR during the 1930s. They regarded science as simply a necessary instrument for gaining the power to implement their social programme. The idea that the scientist is concerned about the truth for its own sake was ridiculed as a piece of bourgeois ideology. Polanyi had to ask the question: What are the grounds for affirming that the findings of science are not merely useful but true? He saw that current views of the nature of science gave no satisfactory answer to this question, and that, if this question was evaded, science itself could collapse. At a time when such far-sightedness was remarkable, Polanyi foresaw not only the nemesis which must follow for Soviet science and culture, but also the loss of confidence in science, and the threat to western culture as a whole which must follow if the element of personal responsibility in the work of the scientist was not recognised. Polanyi traced the source of the trouble in a false ideal of 'objectivity', in the illusion that there could be a

kind of knowing from which the knowing subject – a human being shaped by historical, cultural and psychological factors – is eliminated or ignored. The effect of this false

ideal was to relegate a vast amount of what human beings know to the realm of the ‘subjective’. Polanyi, as a working scientist rather than a philosopher of science, knew well the personal factors which shape all scientific work - the necessary apprenticeship to a long tradition of scientific work, the learning of skills, and the personal gifts of intuition, imagination, judgement, courage and patience without which scientific advance would never happen. In the preface to his major work he gives a succinct description of his central concern. After speaking of the personal participation of the knower in the act of knowing, he goes on: ‘But this does not make our understanding *subjective*. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality, contact that is defined as the condition for anticipating an indefinite range of as yet unknown (and perhaps yet inconceivable) true implications. It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as “Personal Knowledge”’ (*Personal Knowledge pp. vii-viii*). To put it briefly, all knowing of any kind involved personal commitment and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s beliefs. It follows that Polanyi unmasks the illusion that science is a separate kind of knowledge, sharply distinguished from the vast areas of our everyday knowing which we do not call ‘scientific’. His message, as Drusilla Scott charmingly shows in the present book, is addressed to Everyman, with the assurance that we do not need to be intimidated by the claims of some populariser of ‘science’ to represent a superior kind of knowledge by which all the rest of our knowing is to be tested and judged. There is no way of arriving at the truth except by being willing to take the risk of being mistaken. We must recover the confidence to affirm what can be doubted as a step on the way to contact with reality. I warmly commend this fine book. It will help the reader to enter into the thought of a profoundly original and important thinker.

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