

**The Quest for Truth and Freedom: Some Polanyian reflections (I) –
Introducing Michael Polanyi to a post-truth world
By Bishop David Atkinson and published on Fulcrum**

The Quest for Truth and Freedom: Some Polanyian reflections

I. Introducing Michael Polanyi to a post-truth world

In a two-part article helping the church think about how it understands itself and the nature of its calling in a ‘post-truth’ world, David Atkinson here first introduces the life and work of Michael Polanyi and two key themes in his thought: The Way of Discovery and the personal component in all knowledge and the key role of A Society of Explorers. In the second part, these insights will be related to a number of areas of Christian discipleship and the church’s witness.

Christian discipleship is – among other things, as we shall say more fully in due course - about following The Truth, doing the truth, living the truth, preaching the truth, worshipping in spirit and in truth. One of the disquieting features of our times is the disappearance of truth. This paper explores one approach to understanding the excitement of exploring truth, particularly in science, and its liberating power in society, drawing on the work of the scientist/philosopher Michael Polanyi. It concludes with drawing some implications from his insights for our understanding of Christian discipleship today, just over forty years after his death.

The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2016 was ‘post-truth’ — an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. Dictionary editors said that, while the word had been in existence for the past decade, there was a ‘spike’ in frequency in 2016 ‘in the context of the EU referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States’.

‘Post-truth’ is not quite the same as ‘lies’. It is about exercising power and control and manipulating public opinion. The liar may know the truth, but the post-truth politician does not care what is truth and what is not. We were made aware of post-truth politics during the 2016 UK Referendum campaign on leaving the European Union by the bus advertising ‘£350 million a week’ supposedly available for the NHS, and by the message from UKIP’s deplorable anti-migrant ‘Breaking point’ poster. In ‘post-truth’ politics, people pick and choose between ‘alternative facts’, the phrase once used by one of President Trump’s aides when defending the White House’s statements concerning the numbers who attended the presidential inauguration. Or we live in the ‘power of positive thinking’-land of Odd Ball, Donald Sutherland’s character in the film *Kelly’s Heroes*, who responds to a fellow soldier’s complaint that a bridge might have been blown up again by the enemy: ‘it’s a beautiful bridge... think it will be there, and it will be there.’ It is possible to be drawn into a fantasy land where, through our own determination, we can come to believe whatever we wish to be ‘true.’ It is increasingly possible, also, for example through social media, to belong within a bubble of like-minded people who continually reinforce each other’s views of the world whether or not that has any true relationship to reality.

For post-truth politicians and journalists — and, indeed, for many users of social media — ‘truth’ no longer carries the transcendent quality that it does, for example, in the Bible.

The Meaning of ‘truth’

There are, of course, many minefields in philosophical discussions about truth – correspondence theories, coherence theories, existential approaches, and so on. Most of these concentrate on what it

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means to say that a statement is ‘true’. In the Bible, the emphasis is much more practical. In the Old Testament, ‘truth’ can mean faithfulness or reliability. It is about ‘doing the truth’, acting with integrity. It points to God’s ‘steadfast love and faithfulness.’

In the New Testament, truth is contrasted with hypocrisy when words do not match deeds. In Jesus, whose ‘word is truth’ and who embodies ‘the truth’, we see personal integrity, trustworthiness, being in touch with reality. The antithesis of truth is not error, so much as lies or deception. Although ‘truth’ can mean ‘a true statement’, it more often refers to ‘moral and personal integrity’. ‘Truth’ thus means more than simply ‘factuality’. Truth encompasses integrity, reliability and faithfulness in the discerning, interpreting and recounting of ‘facts’ in accordance with reality. ‘Truth’ points to something transcendent, something universal, described by Christian faith in terms of the trustworthiness of God.

To speak of truth – or indeed justice, love or beauty – as *transcendent* is to say that truth confronts us with its own masterful objectivity and ultimate authority. Truth stands above us and beyond us as a reality that we reach out to but never control, as a navigator before the pole star reaches towards it and sets his course by it. Truth places us under an obligation to respond appropriately. Our statements about truth refer beyond themselves, and so are not themselves ultimate and final, but always open to correction as further truth is disclosed to us in our discoveries. Our statements have their own truthfulness by reference to an ultimate truth. In Christian understanding, Truth is always related to the faithfulness of God, who is the source of all Truth, and is revealed as personal Being in Jesus Christ.

The word ‘truth’ used always to carry this ‘transcendent’ quality. However, in our recent ‘post-modern’ world, we have become used to ‘relative truth’ - ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth’. And now ‘post-truth’ describes people for whom truth simply does not matter - except when we disagree with someone else’s truth, which we then call ‘fake’. Our loss of the transcendent nature of truth could have deeply troubling consequences for public life. One voice from the past for whom these issues were of supreme importance was the scientist/philosopher Michael Polanyi.

I have called this paper ‘The Quest for Truth and Freedom’ to honour two of Michael Polanyi’s major commitments. His first commitment was to science as a quest for knowledge. In 1951 he wrote ‘Until fairly recently it used to be assumed that [pure science] served its own purpose: the discovery of knowledge for the love of truth.’¹ His second major commitment was for what he called a ‘free society’. When truth is no longer respected, or even acknowledged, he argued, our very freedoms are at stake. ‘A general respect for truth is all that is needed for society to be free.’²

It was Polanyi’s belief in the transcendent reality of truth that underlay his approach to science as an intellectual passion, and also his deep concern for what he called the crisis of modern culture, and the loss of commitment to truth in our political and social worlds. So who was Michael Polanyi?

Michael Polanyi: A Short Biography

Michael Polanyi was born in Hungary to a secular Jewish family in 1891. He started academic life working to gain doctorates in both medicine and in chemistry. His research included chemical kinetics,

¹ *Logic of Liberty*, 1951 (published Liberty Fund 1998), p.3,[LL].

² *Science, Faith and Society*, Chicago 1946, p. 19. [SFS].

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x-ray diffraction, adsorption of gases, fibre diffraction analysis, and plastic deformation of ductile metals. In Hungary, in 1918 he became secretary to the Minister of Health.

Polanyi emigrated to Germany in 1926, becoming a chemistry professor at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin. He also - because of the political situation there - became very interested in economics. (His older brother Karl Polanyi was due to be recognized internationally as a leading economic historian.) Then, in 1933, with the coming to power of the Nazis, Michael resigned his chair in Germany and came to England, becoming a Professor of Chemistry at the University of Manchester. He was later given a specially created Chair at Manchester in social sciences. In 1944 Michael Polanyi was elected a member of the Royal Society, and on his retirement from Manchester in 1958 he was elected a Senior Research Fellow at Merton College, Oxford. He died in Oxford in 1976.

Key factors in Polanyi's academic development.

Various factors moved Polanyi from his career in chemistry to his study of politics, social sciences, and eventually philosophy. He came to believe that it was a terribly wrong understanding of science that distorted humanity's understanding of our place in the world, and of what makes for a healthy and free society. Although brought up in a secular Jewish family, he was increasingly attracted to the Christian faith, and at one point spoke of a belief in a spiritual reality, though he later said that he would prefer to call it a belief in the reality of emergent meaning and truth.³ In his last book, *Meaning*,⁴ Polanyi wrote of the huge importance of spiritual imagination and faith, and 'the religious frame of mind'. Although clearly very sympathetic to Christian faith, and certainly to the transcendent values embedded in 'the Christian inheritance', his own personal religious convictions remain mostly hidden in his writings.

In the mid 1930's Michael Polanyi was very disturbed by developments in Soviet Russia's approach to science. To cut a longish story short, a conversation in 1935 with Nikolai Bukharin, a senior Communist political leader, shocked Polanyi. Polanyi asked Bukharin what was the future of pure science in the Soviet Union? Bukharin explained that pure science was a symptom of a class society. And 'although scientists freely follow their own interests, owing to the internal harmony of socialist society they would inevitably be led to lines of research which would benefit the current Five Year Plan'. The comprehensive social planning of all research, Bukharin claimed, was merely a confirmation of the 'pre-existing harmony between scientific and social aims'. Polanyi was a passionate believer in the freedom of science, and so found this deplorable. There was massive persecution of biologists in particular in Soviet Russia, physical scientists for some reason seemed to get off more lightly. So what was going on, Polanyi asked himself, both in society and in science? Marxism, claiming to be a science, faced Polanyi with questions about truth, about society and about science. His major life's work was an attempt to address these questions.⁵

Polanyi believed Western culture was in crisis, a crisis that led the twentieth century to be the most violent in history. The clue to his understanding of this crisis came to him from his reflections on the nature of scientific discovery but he was propelled to this clue by the brutal and violent events in which

³ SFS, p. 17.

⁴ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning*, Chicago 1975.

⁵ 'Background and Prospect', 1963; the new foreword to *Science Faith and Society*, 1946.

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he was caught up.⁶ He began to see that immense evils spring from a false scientific outlook. He knew from his scientific experience that discovery was rooted in freedom, and freedom was rooted in a faith in certain fundamental values, both of which Marxism denied. So he had to find a way of justifying his belief and this was urgent because Bukharin's denial of the independence of thought seemed to Polanyi a symptom of what 'underlay the violence, oppression and inhumanity that he saw destroying Europe'.⁷

Much of Polanyi's work can be summarized in two phrases: First, 'The Way of Discovery', an exploration of the personal component in all knowledge; and second, 'A Society of Explorers', Polanyi's name for the community of science which provided him with a model for understanding The Free Society, and for his work in politics and social theory.

A. *The Way of Discovery*

Polanyi's work focused on an exploration of how scientific knowledge is arrived at, and what it is.⁸ He had come to believe that the social crisis in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s was underpinned by a false ideal of 'scientific detachment'. It made him ask what science really is, and what is going on when we make a discovery. One of Polanyi's major pre-occupations became the error of assuming that knowledge can be detached from the human knowing person, 'the kind of detachment which is currently supposed to be the mark of scientific integrity'.⁹ Polanyi argued that the ideal of objective detachment can be traced to the rationalism and critical doubt of the Enlightenment, and it has undermined the commitment to the transcendent values of truth-seeking, liberty and justice.

To be clear: Polanyi does hold firmly onto the notion of objectivity. It is the false notion of 'so-called scientific objectivity', detached from human agency, and the idea that science is somehow 'value-free', which Polanyi criticises so fully. He does so because *all* knowledge, he argues, is not actually detached knowledge: the human knowing person is always inescapably part of our knowledge. Polanyi is trying to provide a fresh examination of the grounds of all knowledge of which science is one part.

Our exploration of Polanyi's philosophy of scientific discovery is divided into four sections.

1. *All knowledge is personal*

Michael Polanyi's major work is called *Personal Knowledge*¹⁰. This was based on the Gifford Lectures of 1951-2, and developed ideas he had published in 1946 in the book *Science, Faith and Society*. In these lectures he developed his opposition to a positivist account of science, and illustrated the important role that personal commitments play in the practice of science. In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi set out to re-equip us with the skills and faculties that generations of 'critical thought' have taught us to distrust.

⁶ cf. Richard Gelwick *The Way of Discovery*, Wipf and Stock, 1977, p. 41 [Gelwick].

⁷ cf. Drusilla Scott *Everyman Revived: The Common Sense of Michael Polanyi* The Book Guild Ltd. 1985. p. 6. [Scott].

⁸ see Gelwick p. 24.

⁹ 'The Scientific Outlook, its sickness and cure'. *Science*, 125, March 15th 1957. [Scientific Outlook].

¹⁰ *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Routledge 1958

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He wanted to interpret the world as it is, not as ‘objectivist science’ said it must be. Polanyi developed the view that all knowledge relies on personal judgments. One of his primary theses is that there is an unavoidable act of personal participation and personal commitment to a framework of interpretation in all our explicit knowledge.

The scientist is not a detached observer, but actively participates in knowledge - we choose the questions to explore; we make judgments about measurements and probabilities; we develop skills; we formulate theories. We are driven by passions, informed guesses and hunches, by commitment, by the longing for discovery. There is an inescapably personal dimension to all knowing and all knowledge. Science cannot be reduced simply to sense data.

‘Personal’ does not, of course, mean merely ‘subjective’. In answer to the criticism that such a personal element in all knowledge will land us in subjectivism and relativism, Polanyi looks again at the logic of discovery. You cannot discover anything unless you are convinced that it is there, ready to be found; unless you have a deep commitment to the belief that there is something there to be discovered. It is the masterful objectivity of the reality that confronts us which prevents knowledge lapsing into mere subjectivism. When you believe your discovery reveals a hidden reality, you will expect it to be recognized equally by others. The scientist is seeking to make contact with a reality that at the moment he or she does not fully apprehend. Scientific work seeks to bring that reality to light, and we present it to our scientific colleagues for their scrutiny, their critique, their correction, or their endorsement. This ‘inter-subjective testability’ means that all our knowledge is therefore corrigible, and open to correction in the light of fresh insights, but **we are nonetheless in the quest of truth**. Polanyi calls this ‘working with universal intent’. He says: ‘I speak not of universality, but of universal *intent*: I might be wrong.’

So for Polanyi, ‘there is no finished certainty to our knowledge, but there is no skeptical despair either. Through all our different kinds of knowledge, there is reasonable faith, personal responsibility, and continuing hope.’¹¹ There is an openness to the future uncovering of further truth, which may correct or add to what we know.

2. The tacit component: we know more than we can say.

In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi speaks about what he calls ‘the tacit coefficient’ - a theme which he developed further in his later book *The Tacit Dimension*.¹² He regarded his explanation of what he called ‘the structure of tacit knowing’ as one of his most important contributions.

We begin with Polanyi’s saying: ‘We know more than we can say’. One of Polanyi’s examples is the way we recognize someone’s face. We can perhaps describe the eyes, the nose, the shape of the mouth, whether the hair is covering the forehead and so on. But to focus on these particulars means that we lose the face. We recognize someone’s face by ‘indwelling’ the subsidiary particulars - in other words we allow ourselves to be tacitly aware of the shape of the eyes, the frown on the forehead and so on, as we concentrate on their joint focal and integrated meaning - the face of the person.

¹¹ Scott p. 60.

¹² *The Tacit Dimension*, Anchor Books, 1966 [Tacit Dimension].

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The structure of tacit knowing is therefore this: we attend from subsidiary knowledge, such as the features of the face, of which we are tacitly aware, towards their joint meaning, namely the face itself. All thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware as we focus on the meaning to which they point. Tacit knowing, Polanyi maintains, has this from-to structure. And this is what is going on when we make a discovery. We attend *from* tacit awareness of subsidiary clues *to* focal awareness of their joint meaning.

Polanyi uses the word 'indwelling' to describe this process. We indwell the subsidiary tacit awareness in order to concentrate on the focal awareness. To put it another way - knowledge is not about detachment, but about engagement: **knowledge comes by participation**. For example, a blind man is probing the inside of a cave with his stick. The stick explores the cracks and crevices in the wall and when this is going on, the other end of the stick is pressing on his hand. If the man focuses on his hand, all he will feel is the pressure on the hand. But if he allows himself to be subsidiarily aware of the feelings in his hand, he can focus on the other end of the stick, and he will then understand something of the structure of the cave. He 'indwells' the stick; he is *subsidiarily* aware in a tacit way of the pressures on his hand; he is *focally* aware of the walls of the cave.

So all our knowledge, Polanyi argues, has this from-to structure. We are tacitly aware in our bodies of a knowledge that we cannot fully articulate. We know more than we can tell. But these subsidiary clues bear on our task as we strive to become focally aware of concepts that give these clues their joint meaning in which truth emerges. That emerging truth is mediated through our tacit awareness. We attend *from* our bodies *to* the world around us. Science research has been described as being 'on the knife edge' between nagging ignorance on the one hand and tacit understanding on the other. We know there is something more to discover, but we cannot say what it is. At the heart of all science there remains the element of tacit personal judgement based on our skills. Knowledge therefore always has a personal component, and points towards a transcendent truth.

3. Levels of reality and dual control

Polanyi sometimes gives the example of a spoken literary composition. If we attend away from the sounds the speaker is making, we can focus on the words; attend away from the words, we can focus on sentences; attend away from the sentences, and you will focus on the meaning I as the speaker am trying to convey. We are tacitly aware of one level as we focally attend to another level of meaning. There are thus these different levels of activity: voice, words, sentences, style, and literary composition. Each level has its own rules. And each level is *subject to dual control*. In other words, sentences are controlled both by the words of which they are composed, and also by the style to which they contribute.

Polanyi uses this concept of dual control in his response to the reductionism of some life-sciences.¹³ He argues that living beings operate at more than one level. At one level they are like a machine, subject to the constraints of physics and chemistry for its construction. But a machine is also subject to the

¹³ 'Life's Irreducible Structure' 1968, reproduced in Marjorie Grene ed. *Knowing and Being: essays by Michael Polanyi*, Routledge 1969.[Knowing and Being].

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constraints of a higher level: namely the purpose for which the machine is constructed. Physics and chemistry have no knowledge of the operational principles of machines.

In an analogous way, the DNA molecule in a living being cannot exist without physical properties and the constraints of physics and chemistry. However, for the DNA molecule to act as a code, the information contained in it is not reducible to the laws of physics and chemistry. That information is a property constrained by a higher-level ordering principle.

Knowledge, which has the from-to structure of subsidiary and focal awareness, works within hierarchical levels of reality and of understanding. That of which we are subsidiarily aware points beyond itself to a higher level of reality that gives it meaning. Herein is transcendence. So, as Polanyi puts it:

living beings are possessed of intelligence...which controls and directs the operations of their sensory-motor faculties...But the principle of intelligence is not the ultimate principle or the highest level in the hierarchy governing the functioning of living beings, just as the sensory-motor levels of life leave themselves open to the control of intelligence, so the principle of intelligence leaves its powers open to the still higher principles of responsible choice. Human beings exercise responsibilities within a social setting and a framework of obligations which transcend the principle of intelligence.¹⁴

Polanyi thus takes us from mechanism to intelligence, then to responsibility, and so to morality.

4. A fiduciary framework

We have already suggested that, for Polanyi, knowing is an act deeply committed to the conviction that there is something there to be discovered. It is personal, in the sense that it involves the personality of the discoverer. The discoverer, he argues, is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth.¹⁵ The knower, in her act of knowing, exercises a personal judgement in relating evidence to an external reality, an aspect of which he is seeking to apprehend.

All this begins with a belief-system, a commitment of faith, a 'fiduciary framework' of assumptions and traditions that underlie all science. The scientist begins with the commitment to the belief that there is something there to be found. At this point, Polanyi quotes Augustine's word about 'faith seeking understanding.'¹⁶ We believe in order to understand.

Here is Polanyi's summary of this point:

No scientist is ever concerned with producing the most convenient summary of a given set of facts. This is that task of the editors of encyclopedias and the compilers of telephone directories. It is of the essence of a scientific theory that it commits us to an indeterminate range of yet undreamed consequences that may flow from it. We commit ourselves to these, because **we**

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, 'Transcendence and Self-Transcendence' *Soundings* 53.1 (1970) 88 - 94

¹⁵ *Tacit Dimension* p. 24f.

¹⁶ *Personal Knowledge* p. 266.

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believe that by our theory we are making contact with a reality of which our theory has revealed one aspect. It is this commitment that lends universal intent to a scientist's more original solitary thought.¹⁷

Notice: 'we commit ourselves...because we believe.' There is always more to discover.

B. A Society of Explorers

The second major theme in Polanyi's work shows Polanyi's shift from science into social and political comment, and especially in his various writings on what he called 'The Free Society'. Marxism had put questions to him about the nature of science and the nature of truth, and also about the nature of society. His work was an attempt to answer all these.

The best way to understand this shift is to begin with Polanyi's description of the scientific community at its best.

1. The scientific community

We have already noted that in order to avoid the misunderstanding that he is advocating a wholly subjective approach to knowledge, Polanyi very clearly underlines the fact that the scientist works within a tradition of beliefs and understandings and puts his discovery out into the public realm of the scientific community for scrutiny, correction or corroboration. There is 'conviviality' and 'inter-subjective testability' within the community of science. Polanyi evocatively calls the community of scientists 'a society of explorers.'

Scientific discovery is therefore an art, a skill learned through apprenticeship to someone who knows more than I do. It is unspecifiable - tacit - in detail: through following a master you know more than you can say. But this is really a submission to authority. You follow your master because you trust his ways of doing things even if you cannot fully analyse them in detail. In other words, you submit to a tradition - a tradition which is embodied in skills, hunches, connoisseurship, which cannot be fully specified. A tradition that is corrigible and open to correction. A tradition that carries a framework of beliefs.

So the structure of tacit knowing demonstrates a vital relationship between traditional frameworks of understanding, and the acquisition of new knowledge. It is within a convivial society of explorers, appreciating their tradition but constantly willing to call it in question in the light of new discoveries, that the researcher – depending on that tradition – is enabled to press forward in innovative ways.¹⁸

Polanyi knew that science must be free from external authority but realized that authority and tradition are both vital for the free community of science. The authority of the scientific community is not that of a ruler who claims to know best, nor a majority suppressing a dissident minority. It is the authority of

¹⁷ *Scientific Outlook*

¹⁸ *Personal Knowledge* p. 53ff.

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the way scientists work together. The free scientific community depends on mutual trust, and confidence that others are also committed to truth.

Whether Polanyi would describe today's scientific community in quite the same terms is a good question. Significantly more competitiveness, pressure to publish in order to obtain job security, obligation to complete endless funding applications, and political constraints of one sort or another, lead too often to what has been called a 'cost-benefit manipulation of truth'. Polanyi might fear that his vision of the society of explorers committed to love of truth has seriously lost its way since his time. Could he write now what he wrote in 1946?: that the scientific community at its best is

a community which effectively practices free discussion...dedicated to the fourfold proposition (i) that there is such a thing as truth; (ii) that all members love it; (iii) that they feel obliged and (iv) are in fact capable of pursuing it.¹⁹

2. *Moral inversion*

In Polanyi's analysis of the 1930's Soviet Union, society got it wrong because its understanding of science was wrong. One really important issue for Polanyi was the claim of Lenin's doctrine to scientific certainty. Dialectical materialism was a 'radically utilitarian conception of progressive society' in which - and this is Polanyi's insight -

moral passions are masked as scientific laws, which, by defining a historical necessity, sanctions the machinery of violence. Engels said that Marxism had transformed socialism from a utopia into a science. But actually Marxism rests on the emotional force of its utopian aspirations, and merely disguised them as scientific predictions.²⁰

What we have here, then, says Polanyi, are 'genuine moral motives which are concealed within a scientifically respectable machinery of acquisitive violence'. So a very curious social structure emerged: 'high moral motives disguised as scientific predictions, and secretly injected into the engines of merciless power'. This - he says - is moral man's flight into captivity.

Polanyi calls this process 'moral inversion', and it applies much more widely than his critique of Marxism. Let us put it this way: how can it be that science - which many people rightly and demonstrably thought to be a great boon to humanity - has become a weapon of destruction? Why do social philosophies supposedly based on science become absolute tyrannical ideologies? Polanyi realized that 'moral inversion' is the fusion of real moral passions with a 'detached', objectivist view of science that can lead to an ideology which treats persons as things, and human beings simply as cogs in a machine. When that happens, our proper human impulses become detached from human values and social constraints and are too easily pushed into violence.

3. *Truth and The Free Society*

¹⁹ SFS p. 71.

²⁰ *Scientific Outlook*.

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Just as science at its best operates within a society of explorers, committed to the belief that there is some reality whose nature is being disclosed to our endeavours, so a free society, Polanyi believed, also needs to hold fast to transcendent values and – as a society of explorers – be determined to work together in the light of these values.

‘The free society’, says Polanyi, ‘can be defended only by expressly recognizing the characteristic beliefs which are held in common by such a society and professing that these beliefs are true’.²¹ He goes on: ‘the ideal of a free society is in the first place to be a *good* society: a body of men who respect truth, desire justice and love their fellows.’²² Or again: ‘a general respect for truth is all that is needed for society to be free.’²³ Polanyi is here not far from the commandment ‘You shall not bear false witness’, nor from Jesus’ saying: ‘the truth will make you free.’ But he is a long way from the hollow shallowness of ‘post-truth’. A free society is able to grant recognition to the independent growth of science, art and morality when it is dedicated to specific traditions of thought and the values by which its structures are constrained.

One very positive aspect to Polanyi’s story made a great impression on him: his experience of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Despite moral inversion, that Revolution showed that it is nevertheless still possible for thought, morality, art, justice and religion to persist, even though the governing authorities tried to repudiate them. Personal values somehow broke through, and moral inversion in Hungary collapsed because people demanded the freedom to write the truth; write about real people, report truthfully on events. With huge cost, the quest for truth and for freedom broke through. That revolution saw a re-awakening of a sense of truth, justice and morality. This, for Polanyi underlined the huge importance of transcendent values.²⁴

But what if truth is not believed to be *real* and *absolute*? It may then seem proper, says Polanyi, ‘that the public authorities should *decide what should be called the truth*’.²⁵ But this is the route to totalitarianism and social disintegration. Towards the end of his life, he wrote

When a judge in a court of law can no longer appeal to law and justice; when neither a witness, nor the newspapers, nor even a scientist reporting on his experiments can speak the truth as he know it; when in public life there is no moral principle commanding respect; when the revelations of religion and of art are denied any substance; then there are no grounds left on which any individual may justly make a stand against the rulers of the day. Such is the simple logic of totalitarianism.²⁶

Who today speaks with such a prophetic voice? To choose a very select few, perhaps it is Noam Chomsky’s dissection of current political issues in *Who Rules the World?* Or George Monbiot’s plea for

²¹ LL p. 35.

²² Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, (Chicago 1951) Liberty Fund 1998, pp. 35, 36.

²³ Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, p. 19.

²⁴ cf. Gelwick p. 13; Scott p. 107-9.

²⁵ LL p.58

²⁶ Meaning, p. 19.

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ecological and environmental justice in *How Did We Get Into This Mess?* Joseph Stiglitz analyses the social costs of neo-liberal capitalism in *The Price of Inequality*. Amartya Sen links justice with development in *The Idea of Justice*. Fiona Reynolds nourishes the human spirit in *The Fight for Beauty*. Naomi Klein is one of many voices arguing that climate change is the priority moral issue facing humanity *This Changes Everything*.²⁷

Michael Polanyi and Karl Polanyi on freedom

Michael Polanyi, and his older brother Karl, each developed a strong prophetic social philosophy with implications for economics and politics. Both were deeply concerned with the failures of state communism, though Karl was early on more supportive of the possibilities of Marxism than Michael ever was. Both wrote strongly and passionately about the free society. Michael's thought developed in the direction of libertarianism, with a focus - like F.A.Hayek's - on the priority of the individual, and the belief that good spontaneous order would arise among people if the state did not interfere. For him, the free market, and Adam Smith's invisible capitalist hand seemed the right way forward for social freedoms to flourish, though he did have a leaning towards trying to integrate all this with Keynes, whom he admired. Karl, on the other hand, believed that with the coming of the Industrial Revolution what used to thrive as 'social' markets for human well-being all became commoditised, and human values got lost in the capitalist free Market, which he thought was too often misunderstood as a mechanism within natural science, rather than a human artefact capable of human improvement:

The control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organization of society: it means no less than the running of society as an adjunct to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system.²⁸

However, on many things the two brothers were not too far apart.²⁹ Karl acknowledged the importance of markets for economic efficiency, and Michael acknowledged the importance of over-all government planning for social well-being. Both agreed that freedom in a complex society could only be achieved if it were rooted in and derived from what Michael called the 'transcendent values' which Karl explicitly understood as embedded in the Christian tradition.³⁰

²⁷ Noam Chomsky *Who Rules the World?* Penguin 2016; George Monbiot, *How did we get into this mess?* Verso 2016; J. Stiglitz *The Price of Inequality*, Allen Lane 2012; Amartya Sen *The Idea of Justice*, Allen Lane 2009; Fiona Reynolds *The Fight for Beauty*, Oneworld, 2016; Naomi Klein *This Changes Everything: capitalism vs. the climate*, Allen Lane 2014.

²⁸ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, 1944, p. 57.

²⁹ cf. Walter Gulick, 'Michael and Karl Polanyi: conflict and convergence', January 2008; printed in *First Principles* 24.6.2017.

³⁰cf. also Raymond Plant *The Neo-Liberal State*, Oxford 2010. p. 168. Raymond Plant comments: 'critics [i.e. of Plant's own discussion] will argue that what I have called the 'economic virtues' are in fact embedded in and underpinned by a traditional moral inheritance derived from the Judaeo-Christian tradition which the development of capitalism has in fact undermined consistently over the past few centuries displacing this tradition by individualism and subjectivism. This is a central theme in Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*.'

**The Quest for Truth and Freedom: Some Polanyian reflections (I) –
Introducing Michael Polanyi to a post-truth world
By Bishop David Atkinson and published on Fulcrum**

4. Transcendent values

Both Polanyi brothers, despite different approaches to political and economic practicalities, believed that a good and free society depends upon its rootedness in transcendent values, which Michael expressed as truth, law, justice, love and beauty.

However, of course, in a world of sin, selfishness, and stupidity, there is much to work against these transcendent values and virtues, and much truth is partial. There are compromises with competing value claims. The doctor, out of love, does not always tell the whole truth to a dying patient. More dubiously, a government, seeking to keep a measure of peace, creates ambiguity and bluff concerning the use of nuclear weapons. Pressures on research scientists today to publish results in order to qualify for funding are much greater than Michael Polanyi would have known and this can sometimes regrettably lead to economies with the truth. Too often, for unworthy commercial or political advantage, truth is withheld or denied — as by some unscrupulous scientists who sowed doubt about the harmfulness of tobacco and are now doing so about climate change.³¹

Journalists often find it hard to tell the truth, despite the text-book words: “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.” Of course, there are different interpretations, and all our knowledge is limited and open to correction. Polanyi acknowledged that this was the case in science, which is crucially why a scientist’s theories are tested by a peer group, to be corroborated or criticised. It is possible to get it wrong. But having said all that, and despite the uncertainties and difficulties in verification, we can understand our obligation to the transcendence of truth and aspire to tell it and do it.

That is utterly different from not caring about truth. Post-truth politics can lead to disillusionment with politicians and open the door to extremist views that no one feels it is important to verify or challenge. Social media seems to be increasingly dominated by opinion, and opinionated news. A false news item or allegation becomes a tweet and goes viral through the networks among like-minded people who reinforce each other’s views. Politicians are routinely accused of lying — not least during an election campaign — and increasingly that is accepted as part of the ‘game’. A recent article in *The Economist* illustrated how alarmingly easy it is becoming to create ‘fact’ from fiction and produce convincing audio and video of things that have never happened, leading to false stories and actually ‘fake news’.³² What motivated Michael Polanyi was what he called the crisis in our culture. Where a society loses touch with transcendent values such as truth, justice, love and beauty, our proper human moral passions, he argued, become increasingly liable to be pushed in other directions, too often – as he experienced all too clearly - into violence.

The really troubling thing in a post-truth world is not that we get it wrong, but that truth ceases to matter.

³¹ cf. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway *Merchants of Doubt* Bloomsbury 2011; and Naomi Klein *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Allen Lane, 2014.

³² ‘Creation stories’ *The Economist* 1 July 2017. p. 70.