Michael Polanyi and J. H. Oldham

In Praise of Friendship

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I. Introduction

These reflections explore a relationship between two British intellectuals, Michael Polanyi (1891-1974) and J. H. Oldham (1874-1969), whose twenty-plus-year friendship was close and significant in the sense that it seems to have shaped the ideas of each man. In the Papers of Michael Polanyi, housed in the Department of Special Collections at the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago, there are seven folders of archival material, including over a hundred letters written by Oldham and Polanyi from 1940 until the mid sixties, a few years before Oldham’s death; this material is a rich resource which I begin to examine here. At the outset, I should acknowledge this archival material is not only rich, but also confusing, since it is undoubtedly an incomplete literary record. My interest is chiefly in the bearing of this material on Polanyi’s philosophical thought. But, through Polanyi, I have recently become interested in Oldham, aptly described by King as an ‘English missionary statesman,’ who was undoubtedly an enormously influential Christian intellectual during the first half of the twentieth century. Polanyi was a scientist whose interests, by the time he met Oldham, had already begun to shift toward questions about economics, politics and culture as well as philosophy. Polanyi thus is a figure who moved from scientific research to broader philosophical reflection; although already moving on this course before he met Oldham, Oldham certainly had a role in shaping this transition. Here I outline some contours of the Polanyi-Oldham friendship which the correspondence suggests. My reflections are by no means an exhaustive study of this material; I hope, instead, that they will be regarded as an orientation to an interesting historical puzzle, an orientation which may encourage others to look at this and other archival material in the Polanyi Papers.

At the outset, it is clear that Polanyi openly acknowledged the significant role Oldham played in expanding his intellectual life. Polanyi’s developing philosophical perspective, and perhaps especially his broader interests in religion and culture, were, by Polanyi’s own account, importantly shaped by his contact with Oldham and Oldham’s circle of friends. In 1962, in an interview with Richard Gelwick, the writer of the first dissertation on his non-scientific thought, Polanyi acknowledged that his participation in a discussion group convened by Oldham did more to influence his thought than anything other than his experience as a scientist. In 1959, Polanyi dedicated his short book The Study of Man to J. H. Oldham. Polanyi’s respect for Oldham is quite clear. As I show below, several comments in correspondence near the end of Oldham’s life suggest the deep appreciation and affection Polanyi and Oldham have for one another.

Readers of Appraisal are likely quite familiar with Polanyi, but may not be acquainted with Oldham; I therefore offer in the next section some compressed orientational information. Following this section is a more general discussion of how Polanyi’s and Oldham’s lives and ideas intersected.

2. J. H. Oldham: Christian social activist

Joseph Houldsworth Oldham’s New York Times obituary reports that when he died in 1969 at the age of 94, he had been honorary president of the World Council of Churches since 1961. Oldham was possibly the most important leader in British and international Christian missionary affairs from 1910 until after the middle of the century; he was organizing secretary of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910, an important early ecumenical endeavour. This lead eventually to duties as editor of the International Review of Missions (initiated in 1912) which he ably directed until 1927, making the journal an outstanding, broadly based organ supported also by Roman Catholics and open to writers of all sorts. Kathleen Bliss, who succeeded Oldham as editor of the Christian News Letter and worked very closely with him in the latter part of his life, makes a convincing case, in her article in the Dictionary of National Biography: 1961-70, that Oldham did much to contribute to an ecumenical climate in the first half of the century.

Oldham was born in Bombay in 1874 and educated at Oxford. He early planned a career in the Indian Civil Service but, due to a religious conversion, ended up working in India, beginning in 1897, for three years for the Scottish YMCA. In 1901, he began his theological education in Edinburgh; although never ordained, he became an advocate for mission education in Scotland which led to his appointment as the organizing chair of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in 1910.
World War, Oldham was secretary of the newly formed International Missionary Council from 1921 until 1938. Flett suggests that Oldham was a visionary concerned with religious freedom and the direction of the missionary movement in the new different world; but he was also an effective political agent and, for example, succeeded in negotiating a clause at Versailles protecting German missionary properties from confiscation (Flett reports he became known as the 'wily saint'). He was especially important in African affairs and did much to shape colonial policy in Africa after World War I. He was particularly interested in education, first in India and then in Africa. Oldham in fact visited Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes in the US South and effectively promoted, in various roles he played, the style of education represented by these institutions for education in Africa. One of Oldham’s influential books, Christianity and the Race Problem makes clear his opposition to racism; certainly many of Oldham’s political activities lived out this stance. In 1937, Oldham chaired an important world ecumenical conference at Oxford which treated issues concerned with the totalitarian state, the church and the gospel. In 1939, he founded the Christian News Letter which he edited until 1945; this was a publication Flett describes as an expression of a group of men and women who tried to understand the deeper currents of contemporary history and to see light in the urgent tasks to be undertaken. In 1942, he founded an organisation for laity named the Christian Frontier Council. In 1952, Oldham retired, although he continued to convene groups, to read and write, and do many of the things he had done earlier. Bliss argues that Oldham’s major concern in all his affairs was practical Christian life in the changing world of the twentieth century. Flett suggests, and the correspondence with Polanyi bears this out, that Oldham was not opposed to science, but was interested in understanding it, using it and harmonising it with Christian thought. Oldham was himself a Christian thinker, although he will likely not be remembered as a particularly creative philosophical theologian. His books certainly show that he was a serious reader of the Christian theology of his day. Correspondence with Polanyi suggests that he had met and talked with quite a few major theologians of the period. Both Flett and Bliss suggest that Oldham espoused a relational theology, influenced by thinkers like Buber. Books such as his Life is Commitment (1952), as well as letters and papers in the Polanyi materials lead me to regard this as an apt description. But Oldham, in sum, seems primarily to have been a skilful Christian agent of change, a religious leader who thought concretely in terms of the changing culture and politics of the first half of the twentieth century. He was, as Flett puts it, committed to working out the ‘relationship of the Church to the contemporary lives of people in society and to the modern state. 4. Polanyi, Oldham and the Moot How did the lives of Oldham and Polanyi come to intersect? Although Oldham was clearly a figure much of whose professional life put him in positions to organise and chair large, international bodies with broad commissions, he apparently was even more effective in smaller gatherings. The correspondence with Polanyi suggests that Oldham was extraordinarily skilled in interpersonal relations; he seems to have been an engaging, cordial and rather self-effacing figure with a miraculous ability to bring people together to talk about serious topics. Bliss gives a partial account of Oldham’s gifts by pointing to his hearing problem: Oldham’s success with groups owed something to the deafness which afflicted him in middle life. The cross-talk of large gatherings became impossible for him to cope with, but the smaller group was ideal. He took infinite care choosing and preparing such groups and planning the venue and subject. He controlled the meetings with well-regulated tolerance, circulating from member to member on his stool, with his vast hearing aid on his knee. Probably the most important group that Oldham convened was the Moot, an intellectual discussion group that met for several years; it was here that Polanyi first met Oldham in 1944. A. Organisation and operation of the Moot and Polanyi’s initial invitation The Moot first convened in 1939 or 1940 about the time Oldham began to edit the Christian News Letter. At least in the correspondence with Polanyi, there is no mention of an explicit objective for the Moot, although it clearly is a selected group Oldham gathered for serious discussions of topics and he others affiliated with his work saw as important. The topics of discussion meetings are various, but succeeding meeting topics usually seem to have evolved from preceding sessions. All the topics might in a generic sense be said to fall into Oldham’s lifelong concern with Christianity and modernity. Polanyi came to be invited to the Moot because his publications and his friends produced a contact with Oldham. Oldham wrote to Polanyi in late 1943, asking him for permission to publish a Christian News Letter ‘Supplement’ of about 2,000 words which focused upon an article by Polanyi published in Political Quarterly in 1943. The ‘Supplement’ was to summarise the main argument of the paper and illustrate it at some points by quotations from the article, expanding that with some comment of my own,’ according to Oldham. Several of Polanyi’s
writings were reproduced (or intended to be reproduced) as 'Supplements' over the years of his friendship with Oldham. Oldham indicates in his first letter that he already intended to write Polanyi for permission to produce the 'Supplement' when he lunched with a common friend, Sir Walter Moberly, who gave him a copy of the Political Quarterly article to read; Moberly was pleased that Oldham already was interested in a 'Supplement.' Oldham also mentions that another common friend, Karl Mannheim, the social theorist who, like Polanyi, was a Hungarian émigré, had approved of Oldham's intention to produce a 'Supplement' on Polanyi's article. Polanyi's response to Oldham's request indicates he was already familiar with the Christian News Letter and was delighted to have his work included there.15

The publication of the Christian News Letter 'Supplement' set the stage for inviting Polanyi to the Moot. In early May of 1944, Oldham sent Polanyi an invitation to be a guest at a gathering, from June 23rd to 26th at St. Julian's, a rural setting near Horsham where most of the meetings were held.16 Oldham indicates that Mannheim has told Polanyi about the Moot and that in the past the Moot has met three or four times a year for a weekend. Later materials, however, indicate that the Moot averaged no more than two meetings a year after 1944 and often not quite that frequently. In his original invitation, Oldham informs Polanyi that the Moot membership includes Moberly, Mannheim, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry, H. A. Hodges, John Baillie, Sir Hector Hetherington and a few others unnamed; guests, like Polanyi, were frequently added to weekends attended by regular members and it was never possible to find a time convenient for all members.

In Oldham's correspondence with Polanyi, he sometimes but not always draws a distinction between the original Moot (likely a some-

characteristically diplomatic manner, soothes Polanyi's ruffled feathers; of Mackinnon's paper he says, It is the kind of thing that needs personal exposition and interpretation, and since Mackinnon is coming to the Moot, this will be available. When the issues have been tabulated your experience and contribution will be of the first value.22

In the letter to Moot members just after the meeting on December 15th-16th, 1944, as Oldham begins to plan the next meeting, he mentions that some members have suggested that Polanyi and Mackinnon should be invited to attend forthcoming Moot meetings. It thus appears as if Polanyi, although not an original Moot member, has after the second meeting become a Moot regular.

There is no question that Oldham managed his discussion meetings with great care. He often tried to frame the topic for discussion, but was not always successful in achieving a succinct focus. The material considered at particular meetings seems sometimes to grow a bit beyond his original intention. Often Oldham seems to negotiate with each person who is coming (or at least with Polanyi) about what his or her contribution will be. Succeeding meetings seem to flow out of predecessors. Often there seems to have been a primary paper or two which was agreed upon at the end of a meeting or in correspondence shortly after the meeting. Such material was drafted and then circulated well before the meeting if possible; Oldham kept after writers to produce on a fitting schedule. The first papers often elicited some letters of response or even additional papers which also were circulated, sometimes response was invited. Sometimes Oldham added things to the meeting material quite late (in some cases, things that Polanyi had written and offered for circulation). Oldham often produced explicit travel plans mentioning trains and times for those attending. Oldham

In the letter to Polanyi dated February 20th, 1948, Oldham comments on his intention to invite to a later meeting 'a nucleus of old "Moot" members.'18 One meeting that Polanyi attended, May 2nd-5th 1947, included some original Moot members, but also other selected participants and was identified as a 'week-end meeting of the editorial Board of the Christian News-letter.'19 The meeting on December 17th-20th, 1948 is identified in terms of the location for most meetings as "St. Julian's Group."20 In sum, letters and meeting materials show that those attending Oldham's gatherings shifted over the years. The name 'moot,' although sometimes used loosely seems to apply chiefly to Oldham's early meetings. There was some continuity in participants between meetings, but former participants often had conflicts and could not attend and some seem simply to have drifted away. Oldham always was bringing in new people who he found doing interesting writing; he seems to have made careful decisions about priorities in his invitations and obviously always wanted to keep the group small. There seems not only to have been much distinction between regular participants and guests in either the early or later Oldham-convened meetings. However, in one early letter, Polanyi is somewhat self-conscious about not actually being a Moot member, he seems to find obuse a paper he has been sent on Christianity and science by the theologian Donald Mackinnon, a topic to which Polanyi apparently wanted to contribute.21 But Oldham, in his
probably always produced an agenda which allocated time and responsibility for the program. For at least a few meetings, a set of notes listing comments by participants was produced and circulated after the meeting. Clearly, participants like Polanyi put a great deal of energy into Oldham's group (in preparing for meetings and writing papers and responses); in part because meetings were so carefully set up and managed, meetings apparently were extraordinarily rewarding events, at least for Polanyi.

b. Polanyi's first two Moot meetings

Of particular interest are the programmes of the first two Moot meetings Polanyi attended: these reflect how quickly Polanyi became immersed in the Moot's orbit of cultural and religious thought. Certainly Polanyi was already interested in some of the themes in these early Moot discussions, but it seems clear that he found the Moot a sympathetic and stimulating environment which helped him develop his own ideas.

The meeting in June 1944 considered two papers by the theologian H. A. Hodges treating what Oldham dubs 'the relation of Christians to a collective commonwealth' as well as some material added just prior to the meeting, including a paper by A. R. Vidler and a letter from Middleton Murry. Polanyi must have been an active discussant even at his first Moot meeting, for Oldham simply includes him in the follow up correspondence to members to select the date of the next Moot meeting. A letter from Karl Mannheim to Polanyi just after the Moot meeting on June 23-26, 1944, indicates that Polanyi provided at the meeting an apparently impressive 'historical expose'. Gábor suggests that Polanyi provided a lecture at this first Moot meeting. There are two pages in archival material titled 'Notes for the Moot 25th June 1944' which look like lecture notes. The final agenda for the session indicates there was a 'closing discussion and statement on the philosophical position of science by Michael Polanyi.'

Oldham and Polanyi exchanged a few letters in the summer of 1944 and Polanyi sent Oldham an article reprint (probably 'Reflections on John Dalton,' The Manchester Guardian, July 22, 1944, pp. 4 and 6) reflecting his ideas about science. In September 1944, Oldham advises Polanyi that T. S. Eliot is to write a paper for the forthcoming meeting in December 1944 and Eliot has submitted preliminary notes and the request that Mannheim and Polanyi should be the respondents to the paper. Polanyi may have received a set of brief preliminary notes, but certainly he received Eliot's elaborated notes titled 'On the Place and Function of the Clerics'. In his long letter of 16th October 1944 to Oldham, Polanyi outlined his own position (which is sympathetic to Eliot's although focused on science) as a response. This letter was then circulated to members of the Moot who were to attend. A letter is there about the cultivation and transmission of specialised skills and traditions are the same ones that are forcefully articulated in Polanyi's Riddell Lectures (Science, Faith and Society [1946]), identifies science as specialised [skilful] perception nurtured in the scientific community) delivered in this period and in many later Polanyi publications. Polanyi seems to have been quite pleased with his response to Eliot. In a letter to Mannheim on October 23, 1944, Polanyi proclaims that his critique of Eliot's paper is 'the summary of the philosophy at which I am aiming by my studies of the scientific life'; he proposed to Mannheim, with whom he was negotiating about a book project, that this critique could serve as an outline of his introductory essay in a book titled 'The Autonomy of Science.'

Why was Polanyi selected by Eliot, who did not attend the Moot meeting on June 23rd-26th 1944, to be a respondent to Eliot's Moot paper for the meeting December 15-18, 1944? Polanyi's correspondence does at least provide a likely answer to this query. Before Polanyi received Oldham's invitation in September 1944 to respond to Eliot's paper, Polanyi was negotiating with Eliot for a book. In June 1944, Polanyi and Eliot exchanged several letters. A friend of Polanyi's advised him that Eliot and Faber and Faber (the publisher Eliot worked for) might be interested in Polanyi's planned book 'Science and Human Ideals'; the friend gave Eliot a copy of Polanyi's article 'The Autonomy of Science' (Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, 85 [February 1943]: 19-38). Polanyi followed up on this lead by writing to Eliot and told Eliot in his letter that Oldham had invited him to the Moot meeting on June 23-26, 1944. Eliot responded positively to Polanyi's inquiry: '... I was impressed both by this pamphlet and by other writing of yours which I have seen to which J. H. Oldham has referred, and I should be very sorry if you did not give us the opportunity of considering your book.' Eliot, however, suggests he must have an outline and a sample chapter to take to his editorial board, he proposes that if Polanyi has no time to produce such material, they can have a discussion at the Moot meeting on June 23rd-26th. However, later correspondence indicates that Eliot was not able to attend this Moot session and that Polanyi had an offer from Routledge (through Mannheim who was connected with Routledge) to republish some earlier essays as a book; part of this offer was an option for the projected book discussed with Eliot. In sum, it is clear that Eliot at least knew something about Polanyi and Polanyi's ideas and...
this likely was the basis for selecting Polanyi as a respondent.

The agenda for Polanyi’s second Moot session, that in December 1944, was quite full; it included: Mackinnon’s paper on Christianity and science; Eliot’s paper and a background chapter from a book by Eliot, the lengthy response of Mannheim, Polanyi’s response (discussed above), and Eliot’s response to Mannheim and Polanyi. At the last minute, Polanyi sent Oldham a paper (apparently germane to the issues treated by Mackinnon) titled ‘Scientific Materialism and the Modern Crisis’ which Oldham decided also to include. Polanyi indicates in his letter of 16th November 1944, accompanying the paper, that the paper ‘...represents the kind of diagnosis which you asked me to contribute to the next meeting. ...’ The paper gives in abbreviated form the contents of the chapter “The European Crisis” mentioned in my letter of 16th October 1944. Oldham advises Polanyi, regarding the paper, that ‘it fits in with the other material and we have been counting on it.’ In sum, Polanyi contributes two papers to his second Moot session. It certainly appears that Oldham has encouraged Polanyi to contribute and Polanyi enthusiastically has done so since the topics and the ideas of other Moot writers are ones that Polanyi finds deeply interesting.

C. Moot meetings on God and history

In addition to the first two Moot meetings, those in December 1947, April 1948 and December 1948 seem to have been especially important for Polanyi. Although it is difficult succinctly to identify the common thread in these three, it is on the right track to say that they together probe issues concerned with the contemporary meaning of God and the meaning of history. The one in December 1947 Oldham generally described as on ‘The Meaning of God in Human Experience, with special reference to contemporary problems.’ It included a paper by Daniel Jenkins titled ‘Belief in God Today’ as well as a number of ‘Supplements’ to the Christian News Letter which Oldham thought relevant to the topic. Polanyi doubted at first that he could attend (since he had recently been in Germany), but wrote to Oldham that the program ‘is closely relevant to my work.’

Oldham encouraged Polanyi to come and distributed, for the meeting, copies of Polanyi’s paper ‘The Foundation of Academic Freedom’ (The Lancet, May 3, 1947: 583-583) and republished as Society for Freedom in Science Occasional Pamphlet No. 6 (Oxford: September, 1947: pp. 3-18); he also advised Polanyi that he wanted him to ‘open one of the discussions on the major issues raised in your Riddell Lectures’. The meeting in April 1948, as Oldham described it in his letter of 2nd February 1948, was on ‘the meaning and teaching of history including the theological issues which underlie the subject’.

The meeting seems to have grown out of the preceding meeting. In his letter, Oldham advised Polanyi that this meeting would include mostly the same group from the previous meeting; he also indicates to Polanyi he wanted to do a Christian News Letter ‘Supplement’ on Polanyi’s Riddell Lectures (this apparently did not occur, however). Polanyi initially encouraged Oldham to include as a guest, Miss (later Dame) C. V. Wedgwood, a historian who was one of the editors of Time and Tide (where he frequently published); Wedgwood had apparently given a recent lecture on ‘the responsibilities involved in writing a history, that is, the measure of freedom which we have to accept in the interpretation of history.’ Materials for the meeting included papers by Marjorie Reeves, Donald Mackinnon and Michael Foster, including a second review by Foster of the abridged Toynbee multi-volume A Study of History. Emil Brunner was a guest at this session. Polanyi took copious notes on the presentations, although he does not seem to have made any sort of presentation.

The next Moot meeting, December 17th-20th 1948, Oldham identified as a ‘natural follow-up’ which he said, in general terms, would be ‘a continuation of our conversations about God, approached from the standpoint of modern atheisms.' What Oldham seems to have in mind with this odd location is a discussion of modernity’s ‘serious attempts to organise lives on the assumption that God does not exist.’ Polanyi apparently felt that this topic was an odd one that somehow left him out; in a letter, he commented to Oldham:

I also feel a little at a loss as to how I could contribute to the subject which you suggest. Our meetings leave me increasingly with the feeling that I have no right to describe myself as a Christian. So perhaps I may feel the part of the outsider in the discussion. But my dominant sentiment is really this: Whatever meeting you may call and invite me to, I shall certainly attend. I don’t think the subject will make very much difference to the benefit which I will derive from such a meeting.

Oldham responded to Polanyi, advising him, first, that he was touched by Polanyi’s letter and his willingness to come to the meeting and, second, that the meeting was not fixed but would likely be able somehow to accommodate Polanyi’s interests. In fact this happened in a somewhat interesting way. Polanyi wrote Oldham proposing a subject that was of personal interest largely as a result of contacts made in the Moot:

You ask me to suggest a subject for discussion. I do not think I can go so far as that, but I would like to confess vaguely to certain reactions which have been growing in my mind. I am becoming restive about the combination of Marxism and Bibliocism to which Hodges is leading us, and which seems to be becoming
increasingly accepted among modern Christians. Within the last six weeks I have heard two broadcasts telling me that Marxism was the right preparation, and indeed the only preparation, for a true belief in the Christian revelation.51

Polanyi outlined his case, at length (3 pages) and in strong language, against a Christian-Marxist alliance. This elicited two requests from Oldham that Polanyi should formulate such ideas as a paper for the upcoming Moot session:

I should like you to develop what you wrote in your letter of June 25th to me in the form of a paper. What you said in that letter seems to me of the first importance and I think that we should give one or more sessions at the meeting of the group to consideration of the issues you raise.52

What Polanyi ultimately produces is the paper 'Forms of Atheism' which Oldham is ecstatic about as a contribution to the December, 1948 Moot: 'I am profoundly grateful to you for your paper. You could not have written anything that goes more to the heart of the situation or more deserving of discussion by the group.'53 There is quite an array of material circulated for the meeting in December 1948: a forthcoming Christian News Letter Supplement' titled 'The Misery of Man and the Fatherly Love of God' by Walter Dirks; a paper by H. Kraemer titled 'Modern Atheism'; and a host of responses (mostly to Kraemer) by Middleton Murry, George Every, A. R. Vidler, Michael Foster, and R. H. S. Crossman.54 Nevertheless, it is Polanyi's paper that seems to have caught Oldham's eye, his agenda allocated the first evening's discussion and that the following morning (even allowing that some discussion on 'the fiduciary mode' may carry over to a still later session) of the meeting on December 17th-20th 1948 to 'Forms of Atheism.'55

The three meetings on God and history are not really out of phase with Moot meetings which preceded and followed them. Earlier meetings touched upon Christianity and contemporary culture and politics; later meetings return to similar religious concerns. Nevertheless these three meetings do seem to probe issues from a peculiar direction which it seems likely helped Polanyi fill out or enrich his reading of modernity. In some ways, they set the stage for later reflections such as the 'Religious Doubt' discussion in Polanyi's Personal Knowledge (279-286) and the third Lindsay Memorial Lecture in 1958 (published in 1959 as the third chapter 'Understanding History' of The Study of Man, a book dedicated to Oldham) which probes questions about how to interpret history. All of the Moot sessions are to some degree an incubator for Polanyi's developing thought, but these three sessions seem particularly to have engaged Polanyi.

D. Concluding comments on the Moot meetings and influences

Fifteen meetings convened by Oldham between 1944 and 1960 (see the chart in the Appendix) are mentioned in the Oldham-Polanyi correspondence (sixteen, if you count one that clearly was cancelled). It is not clear that all of the meetings mentioned (planned) in the correspondence actually occurred and it is not always clear that Polanyi attended every meeting that did occur. But it is very likely that Polanyi attended eleven and possibly as many as twelve meetings of the Moot or its successor groups over the period. The meetings from 1944 through to the early fifties seem to be ones that Polanyi was deeply involved in; they were probably more influential upon Polanyi's developing perspectives. Correspondence between Polanyi and Oldham has significant gaps in the fifties and thereafter, but Polanyi does continue the correspondence, he occasionally visits Oldham, values his opinions and clearly is quite close to Oldham. There is less information, however, about Oldham's later meetings. But what information there is suggests that Oldham was more and more interested that Polanyi's ideas and writing be a direct source for his gatherings. Some of the later meetings seem to have been put together primarily by Kathleen Bliss who worked closely with Oldham and was involved in the Moot from the time Polanyi began attending; Oldham still chaired these sessions and seems to have been the primary contact with Polanyi. By the time of the later meetings, Oldham would have been in his eighties!

It is clear that after the initial meeting in 1944, Polanyi and Oldham become friends (and eventually close friends) and that Oldham thinks that many of Polanyi's ideas are quite interesting and important. Remarks in the final section below convincingly show the affection of these friends and their readiness to credit each other as powerful influences. Oldham came to think that Polanyi's philosophical ideas ought to be basic to any effort to make Christianity relevant to the modern world; in some ways, Oldham does not much distinguish philosophical thought to which he is sympathetic—and this includes Polanyi—and theology. Oldham often solicited Polanyi's feedback on his own writing, and especially on topics concerned with science. Polanyi seems, for example, to have been especially useful in providing ideas and criticism to Oldham in the period in which Oldham chaired the British Council of Churches' Commission on the Era of Atomic Power which made a report in the mid forties. Oldham's writing does make some direct references to Polanyi's publications. But Oldham read very broadly and his writing often seems directed toward synthesising a great array of contemporary authors. In a book like Life is Commitment (1952), for example, there are several Polanyi citations, but Oldham draws upon many authors. In fact, Oldham's letters reflect that he was constantly recommending one or another philo-
sophisticated or theological thinker to Polanyi. The themes in *Life is Commitment* are generally akin to those in Polanyi's writing; but Oldham's book is concerned largely with Christian religious commitment in the modern world. Polanyi, too, discusses commitment in his writing from the fifties, but from a more epistemological perspective. In, for example, his *Personal Knowledge* (1958), based upon his Gifford Lectures in 1951 and 1952, Polanyi has a chapter titled 'Commitment' which is central to the third part of the book which is concerned with 'The Justification of Personal Knowledge' (*Personal Knowledge*, vii). But certainly the last three sections of this chapter ('Existential Aspects of Commitment,' 'Varieties of Commitment,' and 'Acceptance of Calling') do go beyond a narrowly construed epistemological discussion. In truth, after studying the correspondence between Polanyi and Oldham and the Moot materials, such sections—and elements of many things that Polanyi writes after the mid forties—I see as reflecting his deep involvement in the Moot.

4. Oldham and Personal Knowledge

At least one additional topic, moving beyond the concerns with Polanyi's early participation in the Moot, is of interest and importance in Polanyi's correspondence with Oldham: Oldham was an important supporter and critic of Polanyi's effort to produce his *magnum opus*, *Personal Knowledge*. Although, as noted above, the correspondence record is sketchier in the fifties, some elements of Oldham's role are clear.

Polanyi gave the Gifford Lectures in 1951 and 1952. Already by the summer of 1951, Oldham was seeking from Polanyi a typescript of the first series of the lectures. Polanyi apparently did finally forward the typescript in June of 1952. Oldham reported soon thereafter that he has "been reading your Gifford Lectures with great delight". By the winter of 1953, Oldham was clamoring for the written version of the second course of Gifford Lectures which he received in early March of 1953. Polanyi warned Oldham that the manuscript was untidy and contained "bits and pieces which I have not actually delivered" and he invited Oldham to provide suggestions and criticisms; Polanyi indicated that he, in the spring of 1953, wanted to start on the revision and "to finish the whole manuscript for publication by the end of this year".

Given that *Personal Knowledge* was published in 1958, Polanyi's estimate was wildly optimistic. But by the summer of 1953, Oldham had carefully studied the manuscript he had been sent and thought it very important: he told Polanyi in a letter that "the whole line of your lectures is very much at the centre of things". Oldham wanted to set up a September 1953 discussion meeting focused around the Gifford Lectures and he proposed, a little naively, that Polanyi write him a letter in which he states

(a) what you regard as the three or four most important central affirmations that you wish to make in your Gifford Lectures, and (b) What are the chief and most dangerous errors that you wish to expose, and (c) What (if any) are the two or three chief points at which you feel that your position is most open to attack and need to be examined more fully.

Polanyi replied, 'I find it extremely difficult to meet your request for a brief statement which could form the basis of a discussion next September'. He proposed, alternatively, that a syllabus for the lectures might be circulated to discussants and that perhaps his associate Marjorie Grene (an American philosopher helping Polanyi) could do a succinct summary. Oldham, however, replied that the syllabus would be too brief and misleading; he sent to Polanyi a lecture summary of his own (of which there is no archival copy), based on his notes, which he says he produced before he received Grene's 'ten points arising out of your lectures which might be regarded as controversial'. Oldham said that he regarded Grene's points as 'exceedingly illuminating to me, enabling me to apprehend your ideas from a fresh angle', although he thought Grene's points, like the syllabus, were too succinct, to serve as discussion starters.

One additional interesting note Oldham offered about the typescript of the Gifford Lectures was that he had not been able to provide a brief summary for one of the ten lectures in the second course titled 'Two Kinds of Awareness'. He commented:

I was therefore much amused when I read in the letter I received from Mrs Grene that you have come to consider the subject of this lecture the most fruitful thesis which you have reached so far. My reason for leaving it out was that I found it very difficult, within the narrow limits of space at my disposal, to present it in a way that would make clear to others what was intended. I am relieved to find that this difficulty was recognised by Mrs Grene also, who writes that 'It is hard to state it directly for the purpose of discussion'.

Unfortunately, the correspondence between Polanyi and Oldham has a gap from the early autumn of 1953 until the summer of 1955. It is thus unclear how Oldham's project, to summarise the Gifford Lectures and have them discussed in a late September 1953 meeting, fared. Apparently, the meeting did occur, since Polanyi's secretary requested, in mid-September 1953, that Oldham circulate to discussants a copy of Polanyi's manuscript 'On the Introduction of Science into Moral Subjects'.

Oldham's work with Polanyi in 1957, as Polanyi wound up his writing of *Personal Knowledge*, is another interesting topic reflected in the later correspondence. In Febru-
ary of 1957, Polanyi planned to visit Oldham and indicated that he hoped to bring him (or send in advance) a copy of most of his completed manuscript; he mentioned one nagging problem: 'Unfortunately, I still have not been able to make up my mind about the concluding section so there are about 10 or 20 pages missing at the end'. In late March, Polanyi had still not provided Oldham with a copy of his manuscript, but he promised to do so by April 10th; he apparently thought that the manuscript was not in good shape and he asked Oldham, when he gets a copy, to make pencil editorial notes for Polanyi as well as 'any more detailed criticism, particularly on the passage concerning religion'. Oldham apparently did receive the manuscript in mid-April and Polanyi invited Oldham to keep the manuscript in May in order 'to be sure that you have plenty of time to study it'. Polanyi indicated that he was himself revising his work and he was particularly unhappy with the book's conclusion: 'its closing pages are limp and not definitively formulated'.

In mid-May 1957, although he was in the midst of moving and was rather self-conscious about being an 82 years old respondent, Oldham wrote Polanyi a 6½ page letter about the manuscript which he had then read. Oldham's comments have both interesting praise and criticism for Polanyi. He begins with high praise, suggesting that *Personal Knowledge* is a great heuristic achievement. You open up in succession profound and vital ideas and relate them in such a way that each re-enforces, deepens and enriches the others. As I read, I had again and again the sense that what was said would go on disclosing fresh meanings in years to come.

Oldham affirms that 'of all the books I have read in recent years none has taken so powerful a hold of me'; he proclaims:

> you have by the comprehensiveness of your thought brought to the birth in me a way of seeing things as a whole that up till now has existed only in a very embryonic and incomplete stage.

As a part of his general criticism, Oldham, the voice of diplomacy, admits that he finds the book unequal in quality:

> In some of the chapters the argument marches firmly and impressively and the exposition is as clear and forcible as one could wish. In others these qualities are not so apparent. In some passages, the writing seems to bear the marks of haste, and to be, to use your own adjective, rather 'limp'.

Oldham allows that 'there would be some advantages if the book could be somewhat shortened, partly by greater crispness in the writing'.

There are two specific criticisms that Oldham dwells on. He strongly objects to Polanyi's use of the term 'conviviality' in *Personal Knowledge*. This term, of course, represents a major philosophical theme for Polanyi and it is the title of the seventh chapter of *Personal Knowledge*, the important concluding chapter of the second division of the book. Polanyi did not take Oldham's advice and eliminate the term. Oldham says that he objected to this term in 1953 at the point Polanyi's lecture summaries served to focus a discussion meeting but, at that time, he did not voice his objections. Oldham argues that the meaning of 'conviviality', despite its Latin roots, is today concerned with 'banqueting' which Oldham says is altogether misleading. He suggests to Polanyi several terms that might be substituted for 'conviviality':

> It looks as though one might have to choose between 'inter-communication', or 'inter-personal communication', or Marcel's 'inter-subjectivity' (for which I think there is a good deal to be said), or 'living-togetherness' (which does not appear in the dictionary, and involves the coining of a new word, but of one which does not have misleading associations), or a varying use of one or more of these or other terms.

Oldham's second major criticism in this same lengthy letter is concerned with the concluding chapter of *Personal Knowledge*. 'The Rise of Man' which is Polanyi's effort to shape a discussion of evolution which shifts into a broader vision of human achievement and responsibility. Oldham advises Polanyi that the draft of the chapter is unfinished and seems 'the weakest and least well written chapter in the book' and that it will likely leave readers at the end of the book with 'a feeling of disappointment'. He asks Polanyi if he is really clear about his purposes in this final chapter and suggests several ways to recast material. He proposes that Polanyi needs a certain approach to his conclusion:

Ought not the approach to the final chapter rather to be: 'We have declared our position. Let us now see how the theory and the facts of evolution look in the light of the fiduciary philosophy we have espoused'?

He suggest that Polanyi's treatment of evolution and his critique of natural selection must become 'an integral part of a philosophical conclusion and not appear so much as a rather isolated addendum and after-thought'.

Oldham offers only two further thoughts about Polanyi's *magnum opus*. He advises Polanyi against making any references to the ideas of de Chardin in his last chapter. He thinks brief references will only mislead. Obviously, Polanyi did not agree with this criticism, since he leaves in references to de Chardin's ideas. Interestingly, Oldham shies away from any comment on Polanyi's treatment of religion in *Personal Knowledge*, although he acknowledges that Polanyi expected comments. He points out that he is not a 'professional theologian' and may be 'too uncritical' but he approves of the way Polanyi 'acknowledges a debt to Tillich who has been my teacher also in these matters'.

On more than one occasion in letters before the period of the writing of *Personal Knowledge*, Oldham brought Tillich to Polanyi's attention. Oldham's encour-
agement no doubt contributed to Polanyi's interest in Tillich. Just a few years after the publication of Personal Knowledge, during a stay in the U.S.A., Polanyi was able to have a discussion with Tillich. Gelwick and McCoy have recently produced interesting reflections on this discussion in a special edition of Tradition and Discovery [22.1, 1995-1996] on Polanyi and Tillich.80

Oldham's critique of the draft of Personal Knowledge was apparently quite important. Polanyi immediately wrote Oldham a thank-you letter and advised that on receiving your letter I immediately rang up Irving Kristol, the editor of Encounter, and arranged that he will go through the whole manuscript for the purpose of tightening up its style and pruning away whatever is slowing down its flow.82

The Acknowledgments (xv) section in Personal Knowledge confirms that Kristol was one of the readers of the full pre-publication manuscript. In the same letter of 14th May 1957, Polanyi also promised Oldham that 'I shall rewrite the last chapter altogether in the sense that you suggest'.83 In a letter of 15th July 1957, Polanyi advises Oldham that he has recently finished revising the manuscript and has sent this last bit to the press, but that 'the last chapter has been completely re-written, and I hope it is now more satisfactory'.84

In the Acknowledgments (xv) section of Personal Knowledge, Polanyi notes that he spent almost nine years in the preparation of his magnum opus. He reports that large parts of his original 1951-1952 Gifford Lectures were retained in Personal Knowledge since 'subsequent work has not essentially changed my views.' But he does allow that 'other parts have been reconsidered, some cut out and others amplified' (xv). To judge by the Polanyi-Oldham correspondence, J. H. Oldham played a significant role in the transition from public lectures to printed book.

5. In praise of friendship

Those who read the Oldham-Polanyi correspondence cannot doubt that these two British intellectuals developed a close friendship which was important to each. Especially their letters in the sixties, a time when Oldham was increasingly fragile, reflect their emotional connection and each man's genuine appreciation for ways in which his ideas, achievements and life has been touched by the other. Just after a stint in the United States, Polanyi summed up his sense of his own role in history, connecting this intimately with Oldham:

The impressions I gleaned in America have encouraged my conviction that a cultural renewal, of the kind for which I have been preparing certain elements in a relatively isolated position—is at last visibly approaching. The rash and often disastrous attempts to establish millennium in our days, are leaving behind a more sober mood given to deeper reflections. The cry for things more real than the tangible substance of which they are formed, has perhaps been first raised in revolutions against Stalinism eight years ago, but it is becoming clear that the same desire is awakening among us in the west. Our scientific culture is getting under fire for falsifying the nature of things. The beliefs which we shall thus re-capture will eventually culminate in religious faith. Nothing short of that would make us at home in the universe again. I cannot hope for this in my time, but I can look forward to it beyond my horizon, and this I owe to you and the inspiration of your circle as it met under your guidance. God bless you dear Joe, ever Michael.85

Oldham's response, at 89, is equally generous: 'You have been among my chief educators and your friendship is one of my most precious possessions'.86

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1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
63.Oldham letter to Polanyi, July 4, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
64.Polanyi letter to Oldham, 13th July 1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
65.Oldham letter to Polanyi, August 3, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
66.Oldham letter to Polanyi, August 3, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
67.Oldham letter to Polanyi, August 3, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5. 
69.Polanyi letter to Oldham, 8th February, 1957, Box 15, Folder 5. 

APPENDIX: MOOT DATES, TOPICS FOR MEETINGS, POLANYI’S CONTRIBUTIONS

June 23-26, 1944 ‘The relation of Christians to a collective commonwealth’ (Oldham letter to Polanyi, 2nd May, 1944, Box 15, Folder 3). Polanyi provides a ‘closing discussion and statement on the philosophical position of science’ (final agenda for the meeting, Box 15, Folder 6). 
Dec 15-18, 1944 Christianity, science, modern culture, the function of the clergy. Polanyi responds to Elliot’s paper on clergies. Just before the meeting, Polanyi’s paper ‘Scientific Materialism and the Modern Crisis,’ a response to a paper by Mackinnon, is added to materials for the meeting (Polanyi letter to Oldham, 16th November, 1944, Box 15, Folder 3). 
July 6-9, 1945 ‘Church and state or Christianity and the secular’ (Oldham letter to Members of the Moot, 2nd May, 1945, Box 15, Folder 3), and archetypes. Polanyi may not have attended. 
May 3-6, 1946 Christian Archetypes, Report of the British Council of Churches Commission on the Era of Atomic Power (chaired by Oldham); Polanyi provided critique of Report and also provided critique of earlier written draft (Polanyi letter to Oldham, 19th March, 1946, Box 15, Folder 3) as well as 4 papers on science to Oldham when Oldham tapped as Commission Chair (Oldham letter to Polanyi, 23rd November, 1945, Box 15, Folder 3). 
January 10-13, 1947 The survival of democracy. Polanyi’s ‘Old Tasks and New Hopes,’ just published in *Time and Tide*, 28 (January 4, 1947):5-6 was added late to papers for the meeting. 
May 2-5, 1947 Enemies of a free and just society. Paper solicited from Polanyi but may not have been written. Unclear if Polanyi attended. 
Dec. 17-20, 1948 ‘A continuation of our conversations about God, approached from the standpoint of modern atheism’ (Oldham letter to Polanyi, 13th May 1948, Box 15, Folder 4). Polanyi prepared paper ‘Forms of Atheism’ June 1951 The date and topic are unclear although Polanyi did attend (Oldham letter to Polanyi, 7th March, 1951, Box 15, Folder 4). 
Summer 1952 Topic apparently non-theist and Christian perspectives on pressing questions in contemporary culture. Oldham’s invitation to Polanyi says ‘we want to put one of the sessions at your disposal, which you would open in whatever way you like’ (Oldham letter to Polanyi, June 5, 1952, Box 15, Folder 5) Polanyi may have attended and done a session or shared a session with Professor Baker whom Polanyi recommended. 
September 1953 BBC broadcasts topics and speakers for new series put together by Kathryn Bliss, topic shifts to consider, as a starting point, according to Oldham, ‘the central positions in your Gifford Lectures’ (Oldham letter to Polanyi, August 3, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5). Polanyi’s ‘On Introduction of Science Into Moral Subjects’ (later published in *The Cambridge Journal, 7* (January, 1954):195-207) was distributed (Secretary to Professor Polanyi letter to Oldham, 14 September, 1953, Box 15, Folder 5). 
October 28-31, 1955 Projected BBC broadcast talks on ‘the general theme of “Grounds of Belief”’ Unclear if Polanyi attended. 
September 1956 ‘Finding orientation in regard to the present situation in the world’ (Oldham letter to Polanyi, May 2, 1956, Box 15, Folder 5) Polanyi is invited to help shape the discussion line. It is unclear that the meeting actually took place or, if so, that Polanyi attended. 

*Appraisal* Vol.1 No.4 October 1997 189