



## Readings II in Faith & Science

*Publication Year: 2003*

*ID: BK023*

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### Some Historical Items

*ID: BK023-017*

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## Some Historical Items

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I often get the impression in discussions that most people think that the Church's effort to come to grips with science and its products is something new, something that we have experienced only in the last couple of centuries. In fact, Judaism began the effort to correlate its faith with "the intellectual world" a few centuries before the birth of Christ. Does that come as a surprise to any of you?

One of the first interactions of the Christian faith with Greco-Roman science took place in the second and third centuries, even though this was a time of bitter persecution. Then, as now, there was no single position on this matter. Origen and Clement of Alexandria were very open to Greek and Roman culture; Tertullian and Irenaeus were far less open or, perhaps better, didn't grant it the importance that others did.

For all its importance in our day, in our culture, the faith/science arena is only a subset of a broader issue, namely, the "synthesis of faith and human culture in general." How Christianity, and Christians, react with the world is the broader and more important issue. Nonetheless, philosophers and theologians were deeply interested in faith and science almost from the beginning of the Church.

In the fourth century, St. Basil formulated an approach to faith and science that grew into a long-standing tradition in the Church. He published a set of sermons, titled the *Hexaemeron*, that is, *Work of Six Days*. These were essentially a commentary on God's action during Genesis' six days of creation. As Christopher Kaiser says in his *Creation and the History of Science*, "Basil's *Hexaemeron* was one of the first in a series of criticisms of Aristotle, a series that was to last over twelve hundred years and give rise at last to modern (post-Aristotelian) science in the seventeenth century." I would like here to treat only the fourth point in Basil's approach, because, I think it still has great relevance in any approach to science. As Kaiser phrases it:

But the creationist tradition (this bears little relationship to modern so-called creation science) and Basil's contribution, in particular, were not just theoretical in nature. They had strong practical components that were closely related to the theoretical, but took on a life of their own and influenced the history of science just as much, if not more, than the theoretical. . . . In this section we turn to the healing and helping ministries of the early Church, rooted in the biblical beliefs of creation, resurrection, and the possibilities of the miraculous, which through the work of Basil and his contemporaries, gave rise to Christian traditions of medical science and technology in the middle ages.

In brief, the fourth of Basil's interests in faith/science work is the good of others, the common good as we might now call it. It is, then, less concerned with thought than motivation. It looks to answer the question: what can we do with the knowledge we are gaining to help people. That should still be an essential element in our work in science and technology.

I hope that we in science are aware that we are not too different from other people in our motivation. While we may say that the only reason we are in science is to gain knowledge for the human race -- at some point in our lives we all say this and may even mean it -- there are many other motives for such work. Moreover, I suspect we all carry at least some of them. We scientists tend to lead pretty good lives. We still experience the goodwill of the

populace. We are not persecuted for being scientists. On the contrary, we are usually honored for belonging to that profession although this popularity seems to be undergoing a certain erosion at present.

Also, scientists usually earn good pay and have reasonably pleasant working conditions. The jobs we do command a certain amount of prestige and can lead, if we desire, to the corridors of power. We can exercise, at least to some extent, what seems to be a human desire for arcane knowledge. There are lots of reasons beyond gaining of knowledge for us to go into science.

We in science are not so unlike the rest of humanity that our motivation is totally pure. I think (here I may be projecting my own motives on others) that our motives are as mixed as everybody else's seem to be. Aren't we in science for all of the above reasons, at least to some extent?

The Christian position on science and technology to this day carries a strong element of service to other individuals and to the community at large. We do science partly at least in order to accomplish something further. This says at least two things: (a) science is not a privatized way of life; (b) science rarely provides its own agenda and direction. It is always a profitable exercise for each of us to ask herself or himself why he or she is pursuing a career in science. I am not at all suggesting that curiosity or enjoyment are unworthy motives. I am only saying that there is an important reality beyond those motives.

I hope that everyone will concede that the uses to which "new knowledge" is put are important. I hope all will acknowledge that their motivations for going into science are significant, even important, for their pursuit of further knowledge through science.

It is not enough, however, to say (and mean) that I want to further human good and human happiness. It is necessary for Christians in science to be able to say that; but it is not sufficient. We also need some way to decide what is good and what happiness is. This can come only from a relatively well developed understanding of the Faith. As we read in the Book of Revelation: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." Do scientists have a role in this "becoming"?

To return to scientists in general, I believe that most people in science have at least a rudimentary desire to help people and to advance the human estate. I doubt that any would admit to being engaged in developing evil things. This is true even of those working in the munitions field. In a fallen world I do not feel competent to gainsay them. In a world in which evil flourishes it does not seem advantageous to lay oneself completely open to the machinations of one's adversaries. Be that as it may, the ultimate questions behind motivation are: what is truth- what is the good- and, even, what is the beautiful- These questions are no more amenable to scientific method than are our own human motivations.

There are, no doubt, evil scientists but they are evil, not because they are scientists, but because they are evil people. Mad scientists whom we meet in fiction are more, well, fictional than real. Yet, I would not be willing to say that all scientists are sane any more than to say all of any profession are sane. Again, we in science, are not removed from the human condition. We have the same virtues and the same vices as the population at large. None of us is immaculate. None of us is purely anything.

We do things in science, both in theoretical and in experimental science, in order to accomplish something further. We may do our science in order to ask better questions of reality. Not a bad motive, that. We may do our science in order to teach others what we have learned and are learning. This also is a good motive. The desire to live comfortably or to be respected is not evil. Yet, for a Christian there is a terribly important further motive that we must not ignore. We have the training and the opportunity to penetrate a little the veil of mystery that is the material creation. To do this well, though, requires that we believe the revelation and that we work to deepen our union with God in Christ. We are in no way exempt from responding to God's overtures because we are scientists. We are in no way excused from the opportunity to grow in love. Again, it is love, St. Paul insists, that makes the building grow. We scientists should certainly exhibit at least respect, but even more importantly love, for the creation we work with.

In terms of motives I would suggest that the ultimate motive for our wanting to be scientists is our desire to bring the created universe closer to God, closer to the final Kingdom of God --which is and will remain mysterious. In virtue of such motivation, Christians should certainly be good scientists. That added motivation should make us better scientists. We shall be judged by others for our scientific competence. Our aim is not to be better than others; it is to be as good as we can possibly be. Our aim should be presenting as wondrous a gift as possible to creation and to God.

Despite periods of superstition in the Church's history, despite some very abstract (and bad) theology that seems to indicate the contrary, Christianity has need for science and the knowledge we can gain from it. If there ever was a religion that demanded knowledge and experience of the real, that religion is Christianity. Christianity cannot thrive except in the world that God in Christ really created. This is an inescapable result of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity.

Again, at the expense of repeating it too often, Christians in science should be motivated beyond the work immediately to be done, as St. Basil pointed out 1500 years ago. The motivation that will finally lead to an appropriate technology (one that fits with both the creation and with Christian faith) looks to helping individuals and society at large. We can and should share the same motivation as others in science, but our faith should motivate us beyond the ordinary. It should lead us to research not only the true, but the good and, maybe above all, the beautiful. How many of us in science think in terms of beauty? We all should, because what we learn of God's truth and goodness expressed in creation should almost automatically lead us to a deepening sense of God's beauty as expressed in the beauties of nature. Why do we do what we do - for what end? A quiet self-examination is proper.

## Questions

Is the faith/science apostolate merely the latest example of an on-going debate on the place of faith and reason in Christianity? Discuss the breadth (and depth) of this statement. Can it be said that the argument comes down to the use of faith and the use of human reason in developing the beliefs of Christians? Is faith in any way opposed to the use of human reasoning?

Is it conceivable that loving Christ leads to a love a creation? Discuss this. Give examples (from any viewpoint). Is beauty a "scientific construct"? Discuss. Is the search for the beauty in the cosmos a legitimate scientific goal? A legitimate goal of the faith? Can some harmony between faith and science be found in the pursuit of beauty? Is truth more important than beauty? Is goodness? Or are truth and goodness the servants of beauty? Discuss.

Christianity can thrive only in the world that really exists. Besides Judaism, is there any other religion where the truth and goodness of the world are requisites to the fullness of the faith? Given the dependence of the faith on the truth of the world, what does the presumed future of the world mean for the faith?

Christianity is an historical religion with a real stake in the future. In fact, can it be said that the goal of Christianity now resides in the then of the future? Does that future depend in part on what happens scientifically and technologically? Discuss the future dimensions of science and faith? Are they more important in the real world than the debates and squabbles of the past?

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