



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Reflections on the Missions of a Catholic Scientist

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Reflections on the Missions of a Catholic Scientist

[Professor Lucien Morren was a Professor of Engineering at Louvain University in Belgium until his retirement. He was present at the ITEST meeting in 1972 at Grottaferatta, Italy in 1972. Professor Morren was Head of Secretariat for Scientific Questions of Pax Romana which was headquartered in Rome. Professor Morren has also been involved in faith and science work in Europe.]

A Catholic scientist has firstly, like any Christian, to be as faithful as possible a disciple of Christ according to the teaching of the Church. But, being a scientist, he has specific missions to fulfill and it is, of course, these missions which are considered here.

The present cultural environment confers on the role of the Catholic scientist a particular importance. As we all know, our civilization is shaped by science and by scientifically-led technology. But these also have a far-reaching influence, even in the religious sphere. Although a few first rank academicians may find in the marvels disclosed by science a stepping stone to spiritual considerations, there are hundreds of scientists as well as many of our contemporaries who remain under the influence of current prejudices, namely that science and religion are in opposition, even incompatible. Such an attitude is called scientism.

A century ago, scientism was more ambitious, claiming that science would secure happiness for mankind. Since such ambitions have vanished, one sometimes hears that scientism is dead. But our experience is that there still remains a very strong residue of scientism, and this, of course, has an impact on the missions we consider. The first residue of scientism is the restriction of the exercise of reason to one type of scientific rationality. This is a crucial point for it is at the root of two major but quite different deficiencies regarding the relations between science and faith:

- 1.) faith is then deprived of any sound foundation;
- 2.) scientific rationality should then govern Christian doctrine.

Let us consider these two deficiencies in turn.

Faith and its Foundations

Classically, faith should rest on three pillars, grace, free will and reason; these are a divine gift and two human capacities. But since freedom and reason are both implied, scientific rationality is here to be discarded for it claims to be not only autonomous but constraining. For instance, there is no question of freedom in the demonstration of a theorem of geometry! One is then led to restate the functioning of reason in matters of faith and this requires us to re-establish the distinction between the rational and the reasonable, an old distinction but one that modern Western culture tends constantly to wipe out. Spontaneously, a Westerner thinks that science provides the only rational way to knowledge, which means a privilege granted to scientific rationality.

Rehabilitating the reasonable (or practical reason) is thus a theological necessity. In contrast to the rational, it leaves room for freedom. For instance, relying on a well-known friend is perfectly reasonable but no one can compel you in this respect. Now, in religious matters, the adhesion to faith passes through what may be called the “knowledge by signs” and a religious sign may be defined briefly as a fact or event bearing a spiritual significance. Divine grace illuminates a well-disposed free mind on the meaning of these facts or events, providing a reasonable foundation to faith. But never in a constraining way: a sign is proposed, never imposed. And the knowledge by signs is so important because God intervenes in history through a series of significant actions or events culminating in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Scientific Rationality and Christian Doctrine

If scientific rationality is admitted as the sole valid way to acquire knowledge, then it should also determine what is credible or not credible in Christian doctrine. There are certain minds, and among them a few Catholic

scientists, who adopt such a position. Are they conscious that they invert the Galileo affair? For in this affair, it was the theologians who wanted to govern science. And, at present, for the upholders of the position I just mentioned, it is the scientists who should govern theology! In other words, one determines what God may or not do and this proves simply the loss of the very sense of transcendence.

A Christian cannot award a monopoly to the sole “logic” governing a closed rationality; he cannot have a one-track mind. He must open his mind to the “logic” governing the Gospel which derives from Love. On many occasions in the Gospel, Christ heals on the Sabbath day showing that, for Him, Love has primacy over the law. In his time, the great law was of course the Judaic one. But the lesson is for all time and today should it not apply, occasionally, to scientific laws as well?

Arriving at this stage, I beg you to understand me correctly. What I just said is not at all a depreciation of science. I am myself a scientist and I admire the fabulous scientific progress in our century. Moreover, being also a Christian, more precisely a Catholic, I recognize the necessity of adapting the presentation of the Christian message to the culture of our times. But this adaptation must respect our basic credo, otherwise it is not an adaptation but a deformation. And my experience shows, unfortunately, that several proposals of cultural adaptations do in fact sacrifice the very core of Christianity. My experience shows also that the authors of such so-called adaptations manifest, but not always, a frightful lack of balance between their very high cultural level in profane matters and their level in religious matters which sometimes remain even childish. And this observations leads us to the missions of a Catholic scientist.

Four Missions of a Catholic Scientist

The first mission, which should be extended to all adult Christians, has precisely an educative character. It consists in keeping a sufficient balance between the cultural level in profane and in religious matters. In our cultural environment, this is necessary for securing an harmonious living together of science and faith within our single mind.

The Catholic scientist will then be prepared to accomplish the second mission which is one of information. He should spread around him what he has acquired, either by personal contacts, in particular among his colleagues, or maybe by lecturing or writing.

A third mission should be to put his competence at the service of the Church and of society. How many problems raised by recent scientific developments are of such a complexity that they require an interdisciplinary approach? Quite often, such problems have an ethical character but are new and require fresh studies. The Church is directly involved in many of them.

Finally, is a Catholic scientist not in a position enabling him to exercise a fourth ecclesiastical mission which is [one] of praise? Modern science has revealed potentialities of nature which were previously unknown but which are now a source of wonder. Today, those who have kept the sense of admiration may fulfill the Cantic of the Creatures sung by Francis of Assisi who celebrated the beauty and the goodness of “Brother Sun” but could not add to his joy:

Be praised, O Lord, for thermonuclear fusion which permits us to live and to know you. (And we may add): Be praised, O Lord, for the semi-conductors whose properties permit the marvels of the computers and communication by satellites. Be praised, O Lord, for the affinities which permit chemical and other gatherings which are the far images of Love

Questions

“My experience shows also that the authors of such so-called adaptations manifest, but not always, a frightful lack of balance between their very high cultural level in profane matters and their level in religious matters which sometimes remain even childish.” Does the author infer that the Christian education of “scientists and

technologists” is deficient? Does his statement correspond to the statement that Christians usually function with less than an eighth grade level of theological education? In general, how does “theological education” coincide with a knowledge of the teachings of the faith? Can “theological education” as such lead people astray? How do we know that theology is in correspondence with the faith? Is it possible for a nonbeliever (a Jew, a Muslim, a Buddhist, for example) to be a Christian theologian? Certainly he or she can be a writer about Christian theology. Can they write Christian theology?

The author comments trenchantly on the value of scientists singing the praises of God. What is your feeling about this? Have you ever tried to glorify God by praising the marvels of his creation?

Comment on the four missions of the Catholic scientist.

Readings II in Faith and Science		
ID	Article Title	Author
BK023-001	Table of Contents	
BK023-002	Foreword	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-003	Campus Ministry Involvement	Father Vincent E. Krische
BK023-004	A History of Science and Faith	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-005	Letter of Pope John Paul II	
BK023-006	The Church & Scientists: 1977 Synod of Bishops	
BK023-007	Religion and Science: Must There Be A Conflict?	Father William A. Wallace, OP
BK023-008	The Christian Notion of Freedom	Bishop John Sheets, SJ
BK023-009	The Worldview of Genesis 1-11	Reverend Hugh Beck
BK023-010	Contemporary Biotechnology in The Context of Conflicting Theological Perspectives	Donald Demarco, PhD
BK023-011	What is Science? What is Theology?	Sister Carla Mae Streeter, OP
BK023-012	Science/Religion Not on Speaking Terms in Today's World	David Byers, PhD
BK023-013	Neutrality or Alliance	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-014	Apostleship	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-015	Science Versus Religion: A Conflict of Ideas or a Clash of Wills	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-016	Some Elements of the Faith/Science Apostolate	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-017	Some Historical Items	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-018	And I Will Make You Fishers of Men...	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-019	The Spirituality of The Scientist	Evelyn Crump, PhD
BK023-020	An Intellectual Gap	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-021	Literalness	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-022	Praise	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-023	The Theological Task	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-024	History and Myth: The Inquisition	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-025	Galileo and The Catholic Church	Robert P. Lockwood
BK023-026	When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and The Bible	Alvin Plantinga, PhD
BK023-027	Christianity and Modern Science	Rudolf Brun, PhD
BK023-028	Reflections on the Mission of a Catholic Scientist	Lucien Morren, PhD
BK023-029	Sociology	William Monahan, PhD
BK023-030	Truth for an Artist	Leonard Buckley
BK023-031	Issues of Concern	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-032	Environment and the Believer	Father Albert Fritsch, SJ
BK023-033	What Kind of Salvation?	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-034	Some Environmental Issues	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-035	The Freelands Project	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-036	Altered Perception	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-037	Theologians Visit the Environment	John Kinney, PE, DEE
BK023-038	Consumption of Natural Resources	Gregory Pouch, PhD
BK023-039	Reproductive Biology	Allyson Chavez Larkin, MD
BK023-040	Holistic Sexuality: A Proper Focus for the Scientist	Hanna Klaus, MD, FACOG
BK023-041	Sociobiology: The New Religion	Richard Blackwell, PhD
BK023-042	Animal Research	Father Robert Brungs, SJ

BK023-043	Patenting of Biological Materials	David Saliwanchik, Esq.
BK023-044	The Inner Environment	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-045	What are the Possibilities of Human Cloning?	Robert Collier, PhD
BK023-046	Cloning	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-047	Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Ethics in The Face Of Uncertainty	Father Kevin Fitzgerald, SJ
BK023-048	Time: The Falsest God Of All	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-049	Six Magic Numbers in Physics	Thomas Sheahen, PhD
BK023-050	On The Domestication Of Science	John Matschiner, PhD
BK023-051	Chance/Chaos Versus A Planned Design in The Universe: Pointers To God?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD
BK023-052	Nuclear Waste	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-053	Seeming Discovery On Mars	Father Robert Brungs, SJ
BK023-054	The Information Superhighway	Bishop Mark Hurley
BK023-055	Is Secular Education Adequate for the Pursuit of Truth in Science?	Robert Z. Greenley, PhD