

THE RELEVANCE OF STANLEY JAKI

OR, WHY THIS CRADLE-CATHOLIC SCIENTIST IS STILL A CATHOLIC

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

PART ONE OF TWO PARTS

JOHN LONG

This year marks the centenary of the birth of one of the most important Catholic thinkers in the past 50 years. Fr Stanley Jaki OSB devoted over 50 years to studying the history of science and its relationship to philosophy and religious faith.

The winner of the 1987 Templeton Prize for progress in religion, and the author of over 50 books, Fr Jaki went a very long way to navigating the treacherous waters that people of faith need to pass through when trying to reconcile their Christian faith with the modern science that provides us with health, housing, communication, and the ability to earn a living.

Jáki Szaniszló László was born in Hungary in August 1924. He joined the Benedictines in 1942, and was ordained a priest in Assisi, Italy, in 1948. In 1950, he completed a doctorate in theology in Rome. His doctoral thesis, written in French, was published in 1957.

When his theology studies were complete, he could not return to Hungary, thanks to the communist takeover of that country and the suppression of almost all religious orders. As a result, he was sent to the United States, where he began to teach at a seminary in Pennsylvania.

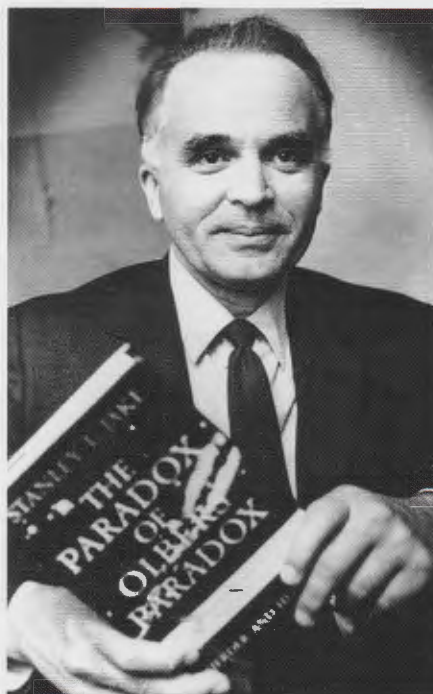
His teaching career was cut short by a tonsillectomy that went bad. The resulting injury deprived him of his voice for ten years. Since he could not go on teaching, he studied physics, completing a PhD at Fordham University in 1957. His thesis then was a study of radioactive gasses, and his supervisor was Victor Hess, winner of the 1936 Nobel Prize in Physics.

Fr Jaki spent the rest of his life studying and writing about the history of science, physics, astronomy, computer science, and numerous other technical fields. As time went on, he directed his attention to trying

to understand how science and theology complemented one another, rather than being in competition as is usually portrayed in the media and at most universities.

In 1965, while working on his first book on science, *The Relevance of Physics* (1966), he joined the faculty at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, a post he held until his death in 2009. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, he produced books examining the history of science, and of astronomy, considering both their philosophical and social ramifications.

By the mid-1970s he was studying how science and its history were related to Christian faith, and discovered that, rather than hindering the discovery of science, Christian theology and culture were an essential element in laying the philosophical and psychological foundations for the scientific revolution.



Fr Stanley Jaki in 1969

The treatment of this topic is spelled out in detail in his *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (1974) and *The Savior of Science* (1988).

These two books are essential reading for anyone serious about learning how Christianity relates to the development of science. It's a fascinating story, and it was summed up in a series of articles ("Faith and Reason and Father Stanley Jaki") published in *News Weekly* in 2019. In 1990 Pope John Paul appointed Fr Jaki to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. His lectures to the academy were subsequently published in the book, *Lectures in the Vatican Gardens* (2011).

How does one make simultaneous sense of the Christian faith and the reality of science? It is not easy, as any Christian university student knows too well. Religious education teachers tell me that the all-too common practice is for their students to stop practising their faith once they enter university. Universities tend to breed atheists.

In general, Christian universities struggle to do any better in keeping their students and graduates Christian. Science always seems to be the great stumbling block.

Who has not heard these claims?

- Science disproves religion.
- Evolution proves that God does not exist.
- Religion is about one's inner experience and personal beliefs. Science is about facts.
- Scientific knowledge directly contradicts numerous biblical teachings, including the creation story found in Genesis and the accounts of miracles.
- You have your beliefs, your faith, I have science.

It is no wonder that that many RE

teachers struggle to answer the hard, deep, big-picture questions posed by their students.

Fr Jaki took these questions head on, and discussed them with a depth of scholarship that would be very difficult for anyone to duplicate on his own.

First of all, he recognised the importance of both religious faith and the practice of science as being essential to the human experience, but also that it is important to keep them separate.

They must not be allowed to meddle in each other's affairs:

"True religion and true science remain forever distinct. Those who accept this fact will have no small advantage of being free of the illusion that science can redeem man, or that piety is enough for gaining one's livelihood, which is not possible to achieve without relying on science."

In other words, science alone does not supply the sense of purpose that

religion does. Science alone does not give hope as one faces the inevitability of death. On the other hand, religious practice alone does not put a roof over your head and provide food for your family.

You need science to earn a living. Indeed, we need science to survive in the modern world. Because science and its applications are so in-your-face, and because religion is about a reality that we cannot see, it is easy to conclude that science must have the answer to everything, and religion is merely a personal experience that brings comfort in our moments of melancholy.

But Fr Jaki claimed that both are essential for humanity to be complete. He claimed that each needs the other, and philosophically, both have the same roots.

Science is concerned with only a small portion of reality. Atheists make a mistake in asserting that science is all that there is.

Fr Jaki says that science's core business is measuring things. Echoing

earlier physicists such as Sir Arthur Eddington, he defines exact science (such as physics and astronomy) as the quantitative study of the quantitative aspects of objects in motion. In other words, science is about numbers, and using numbers to describe the physical world. If you can't measure it, at least in principle, it's not science.

God cannot be measured. Neither can we measure hope, love, purpose, intuition, nor many other objects of human experience. These are not science, but they are still important.

John Long has undergraduate qualifications in physics and philosophy from the University of Michigan, and a PhD in physics from Monash University. He has taught engineering and physics at an Australian university for over 25 years. He is a member of ISCAST Christianity and Science in Conversation, and the Society of Catholic Scientists.





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