

THE RELEVANCE OF STANLEY JAKI

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

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

PART TWO OF TWO PARTS

JOHN LONG

Much confusion results when scientists stray from their field and dabble in philosophy or theology, bringing the quantitative method they know so well with them. Similarly, theologians who try to use science to prove religious doctrines do their flock a disservice, because “revelation has not been given about how the heavens go but how to go to heaven”.

How the heavens go is the job of the scientist, the astronomer. How to go to heaven is the job of the theologian and the priest. Both are important, but they remain separate and distinct.

Science has tracked the history of the universe almost to the Big Bang, but it cannot grasp the moment of creation – the universe coming to be – from nothing, according to Christian doctrine. Creation from nothing belongs to the realm of philosophy and theology, not science, precisely because creation from nothing cannot be measured quantitatively.

In science, numbers are everything. In philosophy, numbers don't contribute much at all. In theology, numbers mean nothing.

Any mathematical theorem or physical theory starts with assumptions, sometimes called axioms or boundary conditions. Interestingly, while science is obviously very successful in what it does and is an essential part of modern life, it rests on philosophical assumptions that it cannot prove by itself.

The practice of science assumes the reality and consistency of the physical world. What we perceive with our senses is real and not merely some form of thought in our minds. It assumes that the human mind is reliable and rational, and is able to figure out how the physical world works. We can use the logic of mathematics to describe how the world operates, then we can apply

the knowledge thus gained to solve practical problems.

Scientists rarely consider these assumptions, and perhaps rightly so. They cannot be proven scientifically and thus are outside the scientist's job description. They belong to the realm of philosophy, and to discuss them one needs to wear a different hat.

The Christian would say that these assumptions follow from the idea that mankind was created in the image and likeness of God, a statement of faith. Perhaps the atheist might say in reply that one can infer science's philosophical assumptions from our observations of the physical world. But that is what Christian philosophers do in formulating the classic proofs of God's existence. We observe the order and logic of the world and make an inference to its Creator. Both inferences are reasonable.

A BLOW TO RELIGION IS A BLOW TO SCIENCE

This is one of the key points Fr Jaki makes in his book, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (1978). Philosophically, the way to science and the way to God are at the very least two paths that point in the same direction. Many thinkers from the Enlightenment onwards presented philosophical systems designed to discredit Christianity. Whether they have as their starting point rationalism (only the mind gives true knowledge) or empiricism (true knowledge comes only through the senses), these systems end up undermining science in their effort to undermine the Christian faith.

For instance, Immanuel Kant is considered to be the father of

German rationalism. Fr Jaki noted that in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), a central claim is that “the notion of the universe is a bastard product of the metaphysical cravings of the intellect”. Try telling that to an astronomer.

Is that what we think when looking at the stunning images produced by the Hubble and Webb telescopes? Elsewhere, in discussing Auguste Comte, the father of positivism, Fr Jaki says: “A radical exclusion of God, that is, Cause in the deepest sense, led through the exclusion of causes in any real sense, to the exclusion of the study of a causally interconnected cosmos, the only cosmos worthy of the name.”

As a final example, when discussing the materialism that Charles Darwin grafted onto his theory of evolution (an example of erroneously making philosophical conclusions in the name of science), Fr Jaki notes that Darwin “failed to realise that any blow aimed at natural theology reaches its target by hitting science first”.

If rationalism and empiricism represent the extremes of philosophical thought, in the middle lies what Fr Jaki calls moderate realism – a very common-sense philosophy. The physical universe has an existence and rationality of its own; and the human mind can grasp it.

This is the philosophy of Aristotle, and of Thomas Aquinas, and in modern times, of Étienne Gilson. It is also the implied philosophy behind giants of physics such as Isaac Newton, Max Planck, and even Albert Einstein, who deplored the non-realist interpretations of quantum mechanics that are taught to this day in many physics books.

Clerics, ministers, and religious spend years learning realism, because the Christian faith through which



they exercise their ministry depends on it. Scientists would do well to follow their lead, because the science that we scientists spend our lives practising equally depends on realism.

One might consider realism to be the metal that forms a coin with two distinct sides – one religious, the other scientific. As with any coin, we can only read one side at a time.

This brings us back to an important lesson. Christians need to trust science as well as our faith, but each in its proper place. Science has the habit of producing theories that make the faithful very uncomfortable. Think evolution. Prior to that, think Copernicus, Galileo, and the Earth orbiting the Sun. This is where we Christians need to keep a cool head. After all, the Christian faith is a reasonable faith.

1,600 years ago, St Augustine gave a warning to Christians not to apply religious faith where it does not belong:

“It is often the case that a non-Christian happens to know something with absolute certainty and through experimental evidence about the earth, sky, and other elements of this world... It is, therefore, very deplorable and harmful, and to be avoided at any cost that he should hear a Christian give, so to speak, a ‘Christian account’ of these topics in such a way that he could hardly hold his laughter on seeing, as the saying goes, the error rise sky-high.”

In this context, Augustine had in mind the implication in Genesis 1 and in the ancient Hebrew tradition that the earth was a flat disk, whereas long before Augustine, astronomers had established the earth as a large sphere. From time to time the Scriptures need to be reinterpreted in the light of advances in science. If that’s OK with Augustine, it should be OK for the rest of us.

At the end of all this philosophising, Fr Jaki reminds his readers to remem-

ber their basic Christian virtues. On concluding his Templeton address, he said:

“In this age of science, and in coming times to be increasingly more scientific, no claim may be more startling than the one that love rooted in religion would be around long after all science is gone. Long before science had arrived, religion also foresaw a stage where even faith and hope would cease by finding their completion in love. That stage will consist in knowing God as He is. Such is the deepest aspect of the true harmony between intellectual honesty and Christian love, between science and religion, and also the crowning phase of their progress.”

St Paul put it in simpler terms in his first letter to the Corinthians: “If I have the gift of prophecy and with full

knowledge comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (13:2) In our never-ending quest to discover the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, let us not forget this simple statement of ageless wisdom.

Fr Stanley Jaki died in Spain on April 7, 2009. He is buried at his home abbey in Hungary.

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.

Many of Fr Stanley Jaki’s books are available at:
www.realviewbooks.com

Recommended reading (short booklets):

- *Science and Religion: A Primer*
- *Christ and Science*

Fr Jaki’s entry at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences:
tinyurl.com/yckxxz mh

Fr Jaki’s entry at the Templeton Foundation:
tinyurl.com/3hb3kye9

The unofficial/official Jaki website: sljaki.com

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