

Reflections on the Missions of a Catholic Scientist

Lucien Morren, PhD

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Author Biography

Lucien Morren has been a member of ITEST almost since the beginning of the group. He has written extensively and some of his papers have been printed in the ITEST Bulletin. His address is Avenue du Grand Cortil 15A, Louvain-la-Neuve, B-1348 Belgium. This is reprinted from papers presented to SIQS, St. Albans, England, 1998.



Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

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 fulfil 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 civilisation 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:

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

Let us consider these two deficiencies in turn.

1. Faith and its Foundation

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.

2. 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 recognise 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.

3. 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. I do not say any more about these matters since our President has largely dealt with 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 fulfil 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!