

# **A Jesuit Scientist in a State University**

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The usual justification for the work of a Jesuit priest in the field of the natural sciences is the presence of the Church in the scientific endeavor through him. This presence can be considered from a theoretical and a practical point of view. Let us examine each of these aspects separately.

## 1. The theory

The theoretical aspects of this problem can be stated in terms of the Church's presence in the world of science and science's presence in the Church. Both presences are necessary for many reasons. The first arises from an awareness that the modern world is broadly and deeply influenced by science. Since modern science rose in the 16th century, science and scientists have steadily increased their influence in the thoughts and lives of people. Today, science has become the court of last resort in issues that concern our society. What humankind knows of the universe, of itself, of society, its present and future, is largely based on the results of science. Scientific knowledge is presented as the only objective knowledge and so the only knowledge that matters. Scientifically-based technology is the foundation of nearly all aspects of modern life. So, today's Church cannot be ignorant of or absent from the world of science if it wants to be faithful to Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel throughout the world.

We must take into account the frequently uneasy relation between the Church and science over the last couple of centuries. The history of the conflicts in this relationship is well known. This has generated attitudes of distrust and suspicion in parts of the Church with regard to the progress of science. The troublesome aspects of the issues between science and faith, while formulated in different ways in each age, continue to be a factor at present. So-called scientific materialism that denies all transcendence is certainly a negative factor in the contemporary relationship between faith and science. In spite of modern Church pronouncements, there is still a popular feeling that science and religion are against each other. This makes an active presence of the Church in the scientific world more necessary than ever if we wish to dispel all suspicions.

## 2. The Practice

The presence of the Church in the world of science must be achieved by the presence of its members in the scientific community. This will include laity, priests and religious. Since the task is important, nay critical, no one should be excluded. The more qualified the one who embodies this presence, the more efficacious his or her membership in the scientific community will be. This is specially true in reference to the inner quality of the person's Christian life. Let's consider a religious – concretely a Jesuit – working in science.

Where science is done today is a primary consideration. Excepting the applied aspects of science developed in industry, science is presently done primarily in universities and research institutes. The largest part of these, at least in Europe, are state institutions. Should a Jesuit work in such places? If he wants to be present in the scientific community, it is necessary for him to do so. But his doing so is not free of problems. State institutions have their own rules and norms that may not be completely compatible with a truly religious life. This is specially true in the Jesuit's daily life, in teaching and research. Can we take part in the hard competitive work that frequently can create antagonisms with fellow researchers? Can publish or perish be the aim in the life of a Jesuit scientist? Can he dare to be different and still be considered a member of the scientific community?

Today, big science is dependent on big money. Unless a scientist is part of a large and important research group, his or her work will be of very little significance. Only purely theoretical work can be done without large funds. Large funds can only come from the state or large industries. Thus funding is almost always attached to political and industrial interests. Can a Jesuit devote a great part of his life working for such interests? If he is in a research group, he may end up dedicating most of his time to fund raising and administration. Is raising money for a purely secular work a proper occupation for a Jesuit? Securing large funds is not easy, as most of us know, and requires a large expenditure of time to establish links with the sources of money which are, in many instances, the political powers. Topics of research frequently are imposed, since only certain research projects

are financed. This diminishes the independence of the research work. Is it justified to work on the projects that primarily interest certain political and industrial groups? This question is more serious when the funds come from military agencies. Can a Jesuit participate in programs that are tied at all to arms development? Indeed, how can a Jesuit scientist be sure that they are not? Research funds are often difficult to trace and one cannot be completely sure of what interests are promoting them.

Behind big money we customarily find big power. Science today is very closely linked to power. In fact, today's science is almost exclusively a possession of the First World. Political and economic power is exercised through the advancements in science and technology. Only the most powerful nations of the world can afford the enormous expenses of modern science. For them scientific development is a source of power. It is difficult today to separate pure science from its technological applications which are closer to the exercise of power. In this association, scientists are sometimes considered to be naively manipulated by political power; at other times they are seen to be a part of the struggle for power and prestige. These days political power needs the scientific community to keep technological development advancing and scientists need political influence to ensure the financing of their very costly projects. Who benefits more from this association? Does political power benefit more? What is the role of a Jesuit scientist in this encounter? Can he keep himself distant from and uncontaminated by the temptations of power? Maybe by his work contribute to the expansion of power in the powerful nations with bad consequences to poorer ones?

The problem of money and power is present at a different level in the daily activity of teaching and research. Scientific peer recognition for many the main reward, since it is linked to prestige in the scientific community. The usual vehicles for this recognition are scientific publications. To publish first, and as a first author, can sometimes become a source of tension with co-workers. Is the ideal of evangelical poverty compatible with a continuous desire for public recognition? If our work is to be conceived in terms of service, should we not renounce many ordinary practices accepted in the scientific community? The problem of power at this everyday level crops up in our occupying positions of direction and control, on committees and boards which designate appointments and assignment research funds. Should we systematically renounce these positions? Can we do this without harming our co-workers and students who depend on us for their promotions? Even when we act in strict justice, this may be misunderstood by many and our Christian testimony may be viewed in a negative light. Is it possible, then, to live a life of humility and poverty in the public exercise of many of the activities of a scientist today?

### 3. Conclusions

Theoretically, the presence of the Church in the world of science is both desirable and necessary. This presence must be an active one in which Christian values are incarnated in the practice of scientific work. Those present in this work cannot appropriate many practices common in the scientific community which are incompatible with the demands of the following of Christ in poverty and humility which St. Ignatius demands of every Jesuit. The Jesuit presence in science must be an active witness to those Gospel values. If we are not different from any other scientist, what kind of a testimony are we giving? But can we afford to be different and survive in the scientific community? Do our fellow scientists see something different in and about us? Does our presence in science raise the issue of the relevancy of the Christian faith in the world of science? I have tried to show that this is a difficult presence in which some aspects of our daily activity has to be questioned. I have broached many questions which have no easy answers. Still, it remains true that the scientific world is an important field in which the Christian message must be made present. Jesuits have a long tradition in this field which is unequalled by any other group in the Church. This is an argument in favor of the position which maintains that these difficulties can be overcome. But today's scientific work has characteristics quite different from conditions which prevailed in the past. This, however, is more a challenge than a reason to abandon such apostolic work. Serious reflection is needed to make the presence of a Jesuit in the scientific world truly significant scientifically and truly Christian, as was the work of Jesuits who achieved such an integration of their science and their faith in Christ.