

An Interview with Father Stanley L. Jaki

Duna TV – Budapest – 1994

Your books and studies have been published in Hungarian since 1987 when you were awarded the Templeton Prize. You were known in Benedictine circles even before that as your two brothers are Benedictine fathers as well, and you started your life as a monk in Pannonhalma. As far as I know, your monastic life began in 1942 but how did it continue abroad and what is the reason for having more than 20 books and 60 studies published abroad before having your first one in Hungary?

The Benedictine Order sent me to Rome in 1947 to finish my theology studies so that I could teach theology in Pannonhalma—to teach theology! but by the time I had received my PhD at the end of 1950 the Order suggested me going to the USA. I was invited to the Saint Vincent Archabbey to teach theology at their faculty of theology and I taught theology and dogmatics there for three years until I lost my voice for 10 years at the end of the third year as a consequence of an operation. Later I saw that it was the Divine Providence working then. That is how I started to deal with sciences, then with the history of science; but I always considered the interests and aspects of theology. When I had to give up teaching theology, or rather a year before, I realised that the issues of theology and science can only be analysed if you have a PhD both in theology and in any of the sciences, and I chose physics. At Saint Vincent I took up advanced courses in mathematics in order to have my Hungarian academic results accepted easily. In 1960 I went to Princeton as an assistant professor and as I became aware of the fact that I would not be able to teach any more because of my chords, I started to think what I would do in my life. I realised that writing books is much more pleasant than digging ditches. So I began to concentrate on writing a book but the most important factor of it is to be seized by an interesting subject. I clearly remember standing on the stairs of the Princeton Post Office in the autumn of 1962 when the idea of my first book on the history and philosophy of physics hit my mind. This book of 600 pages was published by the University of Chicago Press at the end of 1966. My problem was what NOT to include in the book, as if a book has already 600 pages it is very difficult to convince publishers that you want to add one more chapter to it. The title of this book is *The Relevance of Physics* where I cover the relationship of physics and biology, physics and ethics, physics and metaphysics and physics and theology, but I also wanted to add a chapter on the relationship of physics and psychology. The publishers did not accept it, therefore, a year later I started to write a book on the relationship of physics and psychology that lead me to the issue of artificial brain, so the original one chapter grew into five and this book was published with the title of *Brain, Mind and Computers*. Three months later it was awarded the Pierre Lecomte du Noüy Prize.

Yes, and this prize has a special character and aspect that is why it was given to your book. Who is this prize named after?

It is named after a famous French biologist, Pierre Lecomte du Noüy, a typical Frenchman given Catholic education, but during his university years he left his faith and became a first class biologist working at the Rockefeller University in the 1920s and elaborated a new experiment to define the Avogadro number. In the 1930s he started to have doubts about agnosticism and materialism and during the Second World War he returned to faith. After the Second World War he started to visit the American universities to tell the story of his mental odyssey and as in those days public opinion was strongly turned towards Christianity, and in the postwar years people felt that life was uncertain, Pierre Lecomte du Noüy had an enormous impact. His widow collected this fund to award authors illustrating Pierre Lecomte du Noüy's mental conversion.

Let me ask you about your other prize because if someone is given the Templeton Prize by the Consort of the Queen of England, then it must be another kind of prize awarding other issues.

Talking about the Templeton Prize first I have to say something trivial. It is the biggest award in the world as far as money is concerned. Now nearly 1 million dollars are given with it. I remember that in 1988, on 1st January 1988 one of the New York dailies gave a questionnaire to its readers and the most successful answer was awarded with 1000 dollars, and one of the ten questions was that who had received the biggest sum of money as a prize in the previous year: an actress, a scientist or a monk, and of course there was hardly anyone to guess that it was a monk being a scientist at the same time who had received that prize.

We know that the history of thinking is also your field. We learnt at school and elsewhere that science and Christian faith cannot be reconciled but you seem to claim the opposite in your books. Historically speaking when did this process start?

Historically, this process began with the Renaissance, a conscious return to classical paganism in Western Europe. The structure of the society, however, did not allow attacking Christianity or Catholic faith openly, therefore the Renaissance pagan movement could not affect a large number of people. It was, in fact, the business or entertainment of the *intelligentsia*, a very dangerous entertainment as it resulted in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Both Reformation and Counter-Reformation mean a certain recurrence to medieval Christianity. When the Reformation and Counter-Reformation lost their strength and impetus after the peace of Westphalia which meant the end of the wars of religion as everybody got tired of religions, it became obvious by 1700 that the so-called enlightened, the rationalists were in full buoyancy. The dictionary of the Encyclopedia was published as well as the dictionaries of philosophy, and by the middle of the century

the French enlightenment was feeding not the enlightenment—as this is a misleading label—at a maximum speed, but the blindness towards the transcendent or conscious blindness. This is the point of enlightenment. Around 1800 they were almost so successful to claim that the end of Christianity was being witnessed and that the Papacy would die before our eyes.

Your books and lectures, Professor, tell us that you have not taken all problems of science and the relationship and coherence of faith and science, the desires of the human soul and other data only from books and from the history of science but from the living world around us. How did you see these problems reflecting in people?

It is an interesting story. In fact, in my first writings you can hardly find any references to Christianity. First I tried to address the agnostics being agnostic in a good sense, that is, who are not really anti-religious. I tried to show them that the scientific method is extremely limited therefore it cannot contribute to the basic questions of human life, ethics and values. Later, I found the time to deal with a great French physicist, historian and philosopher of science called Pierre Duhem who was born in 1861 and died in 1916 and wrote 30 books and 300 enormous theoretical and physical treatises. He is considered to be the greatest French Catholic genius at the turn of the 20th century. I realised why the universities in the world did not want to acknowledge and his genius. The reason for it is that unwillingly Pierre Duhem discovered that Newtonian physics is rooted in the 14th century, in the Catholic Sorbonne. For an agnostic or materialist scientist or ideologist that discovery may seem like a red scarf for a bull. Although our agnostic fellows and academic circles are willing to admit that Catholicism has certain values, for example Gregorian music, beautiful Gothic-style buildings, organised economic and social structure, they will never admit that the Catholic Church has anything relevant to do with creating science, no matter the quantity of evidence presented.

In recent years you have been to Hungary several times. You have had the chance to compare our society to the societies in Western Europe and in the USA. Our society, mainly our youth was greatly influenced by Marxism and materialism in the past 40 years. That is why I am asking your opinion about Hungarian people's attitude towards ideological problems.

I left Hungary in 1947 and I returned first in 1964. I witnessed a gloomy and desperate financial situation, but spiritually it was not so. I am not a specialist of Hungary, and I met only a limited number of people, but they were certainly strong spiritually. From the early 1970s I saw materialism rising, not dialectical materialism but materialism from the West. That materialism coming from the West threatened the faith more than the terror of dialectical materialism. From the 1950s on, modern technology caused the spreading of materialism in a way that is unique in world history and in modern history as well. This is

the real problem discussed by Pope Paul VI and the same problem seems to be staying with us now and it will be more so in the coming decades. Western European societies together with the USA fell victim of this problem and the same will happen to the societies of Central and Eastern Europe as well as that of Japan. The explanation is simply theological, it is the explanation of the original sin: you can see what is good but you do not do it, you can see that there should be limits but you disregard them; it has been going on so in our whole history and it will go on the same way until the end of the world.

Your books being rich in subject matters cover a great number of questions regarding science and religion. How would you summarise the essence of your books?

My point is to try and show Christians of this technological and pragmatic world that the technological and scientific method is absolutely inadequate to discuss basic human questions, and is even less adequate to solve them. Technology, science and economy will never cease existential restlessness in people. It is the same restlessness about which Saint Augustine wrote: 'Our heart is restless until it rests in You.' In points 34 and 35 of *Gaudium et Spes* there are about 5 lines saying that progress has not been able to fulfil its promises yet. Then 3 other important lines follow in which the Vatican Synod says in *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope) that there is a desperate fight between Christ and the world, a mortal combat that will go on until the end of the world. If this is the real character of world history then it is clear why in the past 30 years theology, religious education, Catholic newspapers talked so little about this cruel fight. Now as I am getting older, approaching 70, I deducted that the most realistic description of this situation is that we live in a rock garden. Not in a beautiful and plain meadow where you can sort out everything liberally with fantastic technical solutions, but we are in a rock garden where among the many rocks you can also find many small fertile patches. God entrusts us either personally or bodily with a diocese or the Church is entrusted with a relatively small area to work on, to grow fruit, but you should not have any illusions that rocks can be ground to fertile land. These rocks mean the continuous opposition of the world. If we accept that this is true, and it is the real character of the world, then we will be able to do our best with a peaceful mind. In this case, we will not be victims of illusion of which I could tell a lot of stories. Young priests, young theologians, young Catholic philosophers start their lives and careers with great hope and huge perspectives, and if the Divine Providence is with them then they will lose hope in the human sense in ten years and become realists. Then they could start their real work.