

Religion and Science in Argentina

Lucio Florio

Abstract

Because of the proportions of the Roman Catholic population in Argentina, which nowadays reaches more than the 80%, and the importance it has had in its history, we must say that the relationship between science and religion had been basically between science and Roman Catholic religion. Later on, there was a Protestant presence in the dialogue but not until the last part of the XX century.

During the Viceroyalty period (from the XVI century until beginning of the XIX) there was a peaceful coexistence between both worlds. Many of the Catholic missionaries were responsible for founding schools and universities. The Jesuits in particular promoted the study of the sciences by the creation of observatories, museums and research centers.

With the arrival of illuminist and positivist ideas in the XIX century, science and religion began to have a conflictive relationship. At that time, some important research centers were created but under the influence of Aguste Comte's ideas. According to him, science is the upmost stage of humanity which is coming to remove other imperfect stages such as the religious and the metaphysical ones. La Plata University, for instance, was founded at the end of that century with a observatory, a Natural History Museum –which is even now the most important in South America- and research centers on physics, chemistry, etc.

As regards theology, it had not been developed much until that moment. The great effort of the Church had been placed on evangelization and catechism so theology did not have proper tools to dialogue with the scientific world. Consequently, a conflict between both fields began, with only a few of exceptions.

As evidence of such crisis, I am going to mention Ernesto Sábato, physicist, thinker, novel writer, fine arts artist and recipient of a Cervantes Prize.

In the last years, a new cultural situation has been produced, which is characterized by the search of bridges between both worlds. I am going to comment on the last experiences in this field, especially the ones of the Meeting which took place in La Plata in 2003.

Biography

Lucio Florio graduated as Professor of Philosophy and Pedagogy at "San José " Institute of La Plata High Seminary (1984). He followed his studies at "San Tommaso d'Aquino" University in Rome, where he received a Bachelor of Theology (1986) and a Masters in Dogmatic Theology (1989). In 1999 he defended his doctoral thesis: "Trinitarian Map of the World. Updating the Perception of the Trinitarian God in the Believer's Historic Experience 1999, at the Theology College of the Argentine Catholic University of Buenos Aires.

Florio is an Ordinary Professor of Trinitarian Theology, Introduction to Theology and other subjects on Systematic Theology at the High Seminary, La Plata (1989 to present).

He is also Ordinary Professor of Theology at the Philosophy and Literature College and at the Theology College of the Argentine Catholic University (from 2000 up to date), and Guest Professor of Systematic Theology at the Institutional Studies Institute of the "Universidad del Norte", Buenos Aires (from 1999 to present).

*Dr. Florio is the director of *Communio* magazine (Argentine edition) . He is also a Member of the "Argentine Theological Society" (SAT); member of the "Associazione ex-alumni del Pontificio Istituto Biblico"; member of "Santa Ana Foundation", La Plata, Argentina; member of the Board of InterFASE, International Faith and Science Exchange of Boston (USA); member of the "European Society for the Study of Science and Theology" (ESSSAT). He was also President of the Organizing Committee of the International Meeting "Sciences, Philosophy and Theology: At the Search of a Worldview", La Plata, August 20, 21, and 22, 2003, which had CTNS' support.*

In the last several years, Florio has taken part in different meetings about science and religion, as in the Second Annual Science and Religion Colloquium of the BTI, in Boston. He was a lecturer at the Winter Workshop of the Science and Religion Course Program: "Ciencia y Religión: Hacia una Nueva Cultura de Colaboración", which took place at the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (México), in January-February 2002, and also at the meeting "L'Evoluzione. Crocevia di Scienza, Filosofia e Teologia", Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum, Rome, April 2002, with the lecture: Trinity and Evolution". Florio is also a member of ESSSAT, and he has participated in the meeting: "Creating Techno Sapiens? Values and Ethical Issues in Theology, Science and Technology", in Nijmegen, Netherlands, March 2002. Last April, he was a lecturer in the X Meeting: "Streams of Wisdom? Science, Theology and cultural Dynamics" which took place in Barcelona. His topic was titled "Walking on a Hermeneutic Territory: The Horizons of Sense for a Pilgrim Man".

*Florio has written many articles about Trinitarian theology and on topics of culture and theology. He also published in Spain the book *Mapa trinitario del mundo. Actualización del tema de la percepción del Dios trinitario en la experiencia histórica del creyente (Trinitarian Map of the World. Updating of the Perception of the Trinitarian God in the Believer's Historic Experience)*, Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2000.*

Dr. Florio is a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, La Plata Archdioceses, Argentina, and he has worked in parishes for some years. Now he is also dedicated to the educational and theological work.

0. I am going to speak about science and religion in Argentina trying to remark some aspects of its history and the features of this relationship.

1. Because of the proportions of the Roman Catholic population in Argentina, which nowadays reaches more than the 80%, and the importance it has had in its history, we must say that the relationship between science and religion had been basically between science and Roman Catholic religion. Later on, there was an Evangelic presence in the dialogue but not until the last part of the XX century.

2. During the Viceroyalty period (from the XVI century until beginning of the XIX) there was a pacific coexistence between both worlds. Many of the Catholic missionaries were responsible for founding schools and universities. The Jesuits in particular promoted the study of the sciences by the creation of observatories, museums and research centers.

In 1610 the Jesuits created the “Colegio Santa Fe”, which became the soul of the scientific and literary movement in this region. Its library had more than 6,000 volumes. Córdoba University was also created by this congregation. This university started to operate in 1614 and in 1622 the Pope Gregorius XV and Felipe, King of Spain, confer it the official category of University, with the authorization to grant degrees which were valid in the whole Spanish dominion. Until the end of the XVIII century, Córdoba University shared the same standard with the most important universities of Europe¹. The Jesuits also built in Córdoba an astronomic observatory, and another one in San Miguel, close to Buenos Aires.

3. With the arrival of illuminist and positivist ideas in the XIX century, science and religion began to have a conflictive relationship. At that time, some important research centers were created but under the influence of Aguste Comte’s ideas. According to him, science is the upmost stage of humanity which is coming to remove other imperfect stages such as the religious and the metaphysical ones. La Plata University, for instance, was founded at the end of that century with an observatory, a Natural History Museum –which is even now the most important one of South America- and research centers on physics, chemistry, etc.

The first half of the XX century was a time of development of sciences which results were the spring of very important research centers and scientists as some Nobel prizes like B. Houssay and F. Leloir.

¹ Cf. GUILLERMO FURLONG, s.j., “Influencias de los jesuitas en la educación y la cultura”, en FÉLIX LUNA, La cultura en tiempos de la Colonia (1536-1810), La Nación, Buenos Aires, 2003, 73.

Positivism went on being the prevailing interpretation of the value of sciences during that century. Mario Bunge, a physicist and philosopher, that at present time lives and teaches in Canada², has had a considerable influence in such interpretation – although he admits a trans-empirical knowledge. He does not accept religion has a factual capacity of knowledge.

A testimony of the situation created by the positivistic interpretation has been the figure of Ernesto Sábato who is one of the Argentine outstanding writers of the XX century³. He graduated as a physicist at La Plata University and went to Paris to work at the Curie Laboratory where he suffered a vocational crisis which made him leave science when he returned to his country. This renouncement generated a rejection of the academic world which Houssay⁴, for instance, criticised strongly. In words of Sábato:

“Science has been a travel mate during a while but it has already stepped aside. Even now, when I nostalgically turn back to it, I can see some of the high towers I saw in my teenage years which had attracted me with their beauty dispossessed of any worldly vices. They will soon vanish from my horizon and there will only remain the memory of them. Many will think this as a treason to friendship instead of faithfulness to my human condition. Anyway, I replevy the merit of abandoning this clear city of the towers -where safety and order rule- at the search of a continent full of danger, where conjecture prevails”.⁵

At the light of the whole of his thinking, it can be asserted that Sábato did not strictly rejected science, though its abuse⁶. In this sense, he anticipated postmodern criticism by detecting the dangers of an idolizing view of the scientific activity, particularly in conjunction with technology.

4. Theology had not been much developed until the turn of the XX century. The great effort of the Church had been placed on evangelization and catechism so theology did not have proper tools to dialogue with the scientific world. Consequently, a conflict between both fields began due to the limitation of Theology and the aggressive modality of rationalist and positivist ideas, with only a few exceptions.

² Cf. www.arts.mcgill.ca/programs/philo/faculty/bunge.htm.

³ I have studied his case in: “Las metamorfosis salvíficas de Ernesto Sábato. Concepciones soteriológicas en su vida y pensamiento”, *Studium*. Filosofía y Teología, Bs. As. – Tucumán, fasc. VI (2003) 121-134.

⁴ “Cuando a principios de la década del cuarenta tomé la decisión de abandonar la ciencia, recibí durísimas críticas de los científicos más destacados del país. El doctor Houssay me retiró el saludo para siempre. El doctor Gaviola, entonces director del observatorio de Córdoba, que tanto me había querido, dijo: ‘Sábato abandona la ciencia por el charlatanismo’” (*Antes del fin*, Seix Barral, Bs. As., 1999 –6ta.ed. -, 85).

⁵ *Hombres y engranajes (Ensayos)*, 144).

⁶ “Sábato no está contra el progreso que acarrea el saber. Está contra la instrumentación irresponsable del progreso que confunde toda la realidad con lo poco que de ella se puede conocer, la verdad con la mera eficacia y la posibilidad de dominar con la aptitud para entender. Sábato se opone, en suma, al desarrollo ganado, en el orden objetivo, a expensas del orden subjetivo”(SANTIAGO KOVADLOFF, "La conciencia de un trágico", in *Clarín*, supl. Cultura y Nación, 20 de junio de 1991, p. 8).

Some attempts of dialogue between theology and natural and human sciences started since the decade of 1960. On the one hand, the reception of the thinking of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin generated an enthusiast -but critical- discussion. In fact, some scientists have seen in Teilhard's essays a possibility of approximation of their knowledge to the world of their personal faith which until that moment was remote from science. Certain theologians and cultured believers thought they have found a bridge with the universe of the sciences. The situation lasted for two decades, but it decreased in a parallel way –although with a certain delay- to the European Teilhard's mode⁷.

On the other hand, the dialogue between social sciences and theology has been continuous and fruitful. In Argentina –in a similar phenomenon to other Latin American countries- came forth a theology with a use of sociology and politic philosophy into it reflection. The “people's theology” was the original contribution to the Latin American thinking. A particular point is the remarkable development of the dialogue between psychology and science in Argentina, especially in Buenos Aires which has a higher percentage of psychologists than Paris. During a first period, the relationship between faith and psychology was conflictive though it has improved more recently due to the appearance of some less aggressive ways with religion as, for instance, Victor Frankl's Logotherapy.

5. In the last years, a new cultural situation which is characterized by the search of bridges between both worlds has been produced .

- Some universities have a “knowledge integration institute” (for instance: Universidad Católica de Salta, Universidad Católica Argentina, etc.).
- Some theological or cultural magazines that have issues devoted to the interdisciplinary topics (as “Communio”, “Proyecto”, etc.).
- The meeting “Sciences, Philosophy and Theology: at the search of a worldview”,
- La Plata, august 2003, co-organized by “Fundación Santa Ana” of La Plata and “Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla” (Mexico), and supported by CTNS.
- Recently, the foundation of the LS of Metanexus in La Plata, with participation of professionals and students of different cities of Argentina.

⁷ Cf. LUCIO FLORIO, “El cristianismo tras los pasos de Darwin. Una segunda oportunidad teológica para Teilhard de Chardin”, *Proyecto*, 41 (2002) 41-62.