

## FOUNDING SCIENCE; JEWS WHO LOVE THE POPE

### Where Honest Scientists Trace Their Roots

By Edward Pentin

ROME, APRIL 29, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Without the Christian faith, there would be no modern science as we know it today.

That was the groundbreaking assertion made by Benedictine Father Stanley Jaki, a Hungarian-born physicist and theologian, who died last year aged 84.

A man of deep faith, lucid intelligence and great creativity according to those who knew him, Father Jaki's expertise in science and theology led him to become one of the Church's greatest thinkers, especially regarding the relationship between science and religion.

According to Father Paul Haffner, a professor of theology at the Pontifical Regina Apostolorum university in Rome, Father Jaki's biggest contribution to modern science was the discovery that it "arose under the influence of a medieval Christian culture." Before then, such a claim was strongly opposed by those who thought science was born out of the Enlightenment.

"They thought the Middle Ages were a dark ages, but in fact we know historically that's not true," explained Father Haffner, himself a prolific author who has written "Creation and Scientific Creativity," a theological study of Jaki's thought. He cited great scientists of the medieval Church, in particular Jean Buridan, the 14th century French priest who sowed the seeds of the Copernican revolution (Copernicus was also a priest, a fact often overlooked in the Galileo controversy).

Buridan developed the concept of impetus, or momentum theory, which according to Father Haffner "anticipated Newton's first law of motion by a couple of centuries." Buridan's theories were later developed and made known by Nicole Oresme, the bishop of Liseux.

Other pioneering scientists in the medieval Church included St. Albert the Great, who taught St. Thomas Aquinas, and the mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. "They all used the scientific method of observation, the formulation of a hypothesis, and perfecting a hypothesis," said Father Haffner. He said their findings led Father Jaki to describe their contributions as the "cradle of modern science" because they showed that a world created by God is rational, ordered, good, and therefore attractive to investigate. Father Jaki found that what inspired this early scientific method was a Christological vision. Non-Christian cultures tended to either adore the world, pantheism for example, or hate it. But Christianity, Father Jaki would say, "put the cosmos in its place" and only then could science begin to flower. The Church was the "womb of science," also because it used to be a leading financier of early scientific research.

Father Haffner pointed out how science has dangerously departed from those Christological foundations. "Now that society has become secularized, you've got this problem in bioethics, of things happening which shouldn't be happening," he observed. "Science has lost its connatural matrix and going on it's own pragmatist road: 'what is useful is good' rather than what we say, that 'what is wise will be good.'" The way of wisdom, he said, "has been lost in science," becoming instead a means to make money or to be at the service of vested interests.

Father Jaki had a remarkable academic career: a "Distinguished Professor" at Seton Hall University, New Jersey, he authored 50 books and around 500 articles. He had a doctorate in physics, gained another one in theology, and held prestigious lecturing positions at Oxford and Yale. In 1987 he was awarded the Templeton Prize for furthering the understanding of science and religion.

At a Rome conference April 13th, speakers also discussed his other significant contributions to the Church, which included him being a "true apologist" for the faith along the lines of Cardinal John Henry Newman, someone who was anxious to discover the true face of God through a humble and sincere search for the truth. Stanley L. Jaki's theories on the Christian origins of modern science weren't well received by everyone, of course, but his opponents tended to be mostly proponents of relativism or liberalism, according to Father Haffner.

He believes this was because Father Jaki's work was "not only a challenge" to relativist and liberalist thought, "but an antidote."

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#### Optimistic controversy

One of the flashpoints during Benedict XVI's first five years as Pope has been the Church's relations with Jews.

Whether it has been the lifting of the excommunication of the anti-Semitic Bishop Richard Williamson of the Society of St. Pius X, or making Pius XII Venerable, this pontificate has not been without its fair share of Catholic-Jewish disputes.

But speaking to various senior figures involved in relations between the Church, the Jews, and Israel, these challenges to dialogue between the two faiths tend to be seen either as par for the course, or water under the bridge.

"[Benedict XVI] is a great Pope with a very strong personality but maybe people don't understand the depth of his thought," said the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni -- someone who has been highly critical of the Church during recent disputes. "We have a complicated relationship with him because relations between Catholics and Jews are complicated on their own, but now we have to deal with a theologian, so you cannot avoid these problems."

Israel's ambassador to the Holy See, Mordechai Lewy, said Israel considers the Holy Father to be a strong friend and that "we are not deluded by the mishaps -- I won't call them controversies -- which are due to the machinery, but not to him." He said Benedict XVI is "well meaning" but that the "machine," meaning the Roman Curia, "has some obvious difficulties." Indeed there is a strong belief in Israel that the Curia

has not been fully behind him, on this and other issues. "It's a difficult tenure for him -- really," Lewy said.

Di Segni particularly admires the way the Pope is an honest broker -- "he is what he seems," he said. He hoped the Pius XII controversy will settle down but he's not confident that it will. However, he was pleased with the Pope's visit to Rome's synagogue in January. It showed, he said, that this pontificate is not departing from an established path. "We needed this sign otherwise all the polemics, all the stories, would damage the atmosphere," he said. "This showed us that the Church wants to go on."

Father Norbert Hofmann, the German secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews, pointed out that this Pope has done just what John Paul II did, but over a period of five, not 27, years. "He's been to Israel, he went to Auschwitz, and he's visited three synagogues -- no pope has ever been to three, perhaps with the exception of Peter!" he joked. "I know him personally and I know it's in his heart to improve relations with the Jewish people."

Father Hofmann also brushed off the well-publicized disputes. "Controversy is part of the package," he said. "It's part of the Jewish issue -- without controversy, you can't have a dialogue with the Jewish people." But he was particularly pleased with the Pope's visit to the synagogue in Rome, and stressed that Benedict has just the right "personal qualities" for dialogue. "He's very clear, sincere, and has a personal way of relating with people that's very decent and humble," he said.

As for the future, the Holy Father and Father Hofmann are planning on reaching out to young Catholics and Jews, and Orthodox Christians, encouraging them to work closer together.

The overall picture, therefore, is one of surprising optimism and warmth.

"[Benedict XVI] is the Pope we have to deal with," said Rabbi Di Segni. "But it's an honor to deal with him, notwithstanding all the difficulties."

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