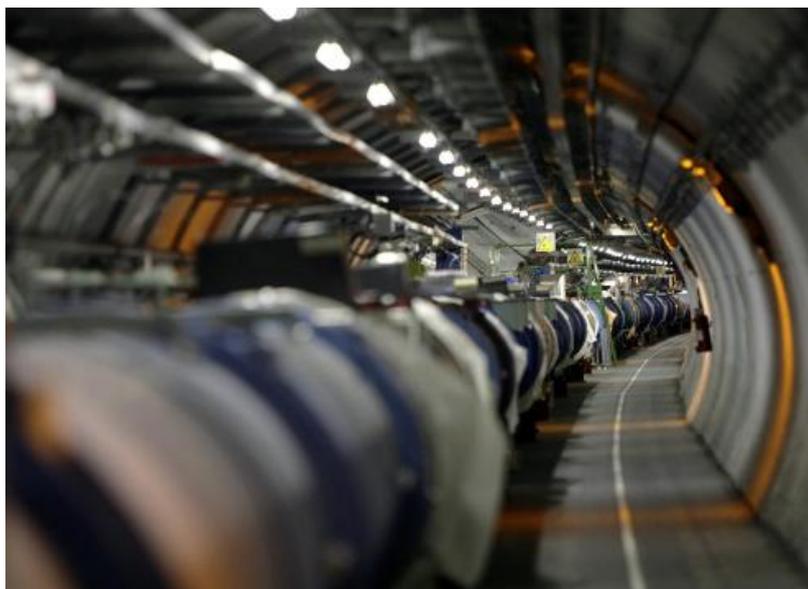


A vital link between science and theology



In recent times there has been a great deal of talk about “the God particle”, mixing cosmology and religion, often with a touch of irony. This definition seems to allude to a recomposition of science with God, with a formula that seems to want to resolve the issue without problems.

These easy but superficial solutions are countered by a serious proposal: to tackle the problem with “person-bridges”, in other words Catholic scientists who in their research and in their faith witness to the possibility of coexistence between these two spheres that have so frequently been described as contradictory, if not hostile to each other.

Michael Heller, a Pole – who is not only a physicist and mathematician but also a theologian – presents himself precisely as a “person-bridge” in a precious little book that has just been published in Italy (*La scienza e Dio, La Scuola*). The scientist submits to the intelligent and pertinent questions put to him by Giulio Brotti, because he has an urgent denunciation to make: “Today there is a serious separation between the contexts of ecclesial institutions and of scientific research”. It is a gap, in his opinion, which it is urgently necessary to fill. The first step should be to consider the method that modern science has worked out and that not only constitutes its greatest success but also its most relevant contribution to contemporary culture.

For Heller believes it is important to establish the vital connection between ecclesial and scientific culture. At stake is the integrity of the human experience. Thus we should start from a certainty: that scientists are naturally inclined to be religious, even if they are not affiliated to a Church, because they are constantly comparing themselves, with immanent rationality, to natural phenomena, realities that set us before the mystery.

Heller then moves on to examine the long history of relations between science and theology. He notes that in the past theological reflection and Christian preaching had a relationship of osmosis with contemporary science, to the extent that he can conclude that modern science is deeply rooted in medieval theology and philosophy. The scientist also takes up Galileo's controversial question, often mentioned as having sparked the misunderstanding between science and faith. The Church had a long tradition of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, thus Galileo's hypothesis in itself would not have had such subversive force had it not occurred in a phase of strong tension, subsequent to the

Protestant Reformation and when everything new was regarded with suspicion.

The scientist declares himself to be particularly close to the questions treated by Leibniz. These, in his opinion, grasp the origin of the new relationship between science and theology and serve for understanding the problems posed by the new hypotheses on the reality of the cosmos and by the certainty of being on the eve of a new, important change in the way the world is understood. Indeed he thinks that this might be revolutionized by forthcoming discoveries, even in the short run; perhaps through a new “theory of everything” which unifies the two important theories of contemporary physics: quantum mechanics [or physics] and the general theory of relativity.

Heller dedicates words of fire to the need for future priests to have a proper scientific training. Today this is something that does not happen. This is either because a humanist approach to philosophy has prevailed, or because, after the Second Vatican Council, the idea that priests must only do pastoral work, in the strict sense of the term, was widespread; whereas, Heller says, scientist-priests also undertake pastoral work, since they can converse with academics using their language and hence can begin a real dialogue.

Heller's idea is that we should propose an encounter with God not when scientific research comes up against problems – making God a sort of stopgap – but rather, when science is running smoothly, offering us a valid understanding of the universe. The essential aim of scientific ventures is in fact “to decipher what Christians conceive of as the immanent Logos in creation”, since in “accepting the fact that reality is a depository of 'meaning' – as science suggests to us – it is difficult to avoid confrontation with a theological perspective”.

The decision “favouring the Logos”, which “western philosophy and science came from, would thus be the reflection of a rational plan that governs the entire universe”.

Lucetta Scaraffia

Lucetta Scaraffia -L'Osservatore Romano