

Science–Christian Faith Relations in Italy

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This is a recap of what I said in Zagreb on June 30, 2017, when reporting to the International Colloquium on Science and Christianity in Contemporary Europe. My report then and my text here are by no means a comprehensive account of science–Christian faith relations in Italy today. I just focus on some specific issues relative to the four topics suggested by the organizers, namely, situation in schools, situation in the media, situation in the academic community, and recommendations.

Situation in schools

In Roman Catholicism, First Communion is situated after the age of discretion (circa 7 years). In Italy, preparation usually starts in 3rd grade (8 years) and lasts two to three years. Preparation takes place in parishes, not in schools.

The national text suggested for preparation by the Italian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Venite con me* (Come with me), reads as follows on page 24:

»Dio creò la vita: la terra, il mare, il sole, la luna e le stelle del cielo, le piante, gli animali. Poi creò l'uomo e alle sue mani operose ha affidato l'universo. Ma Adamo ed Eva, i primi uomini, si ribellarono a Dio. Fu il primo peccato, il peccato originale, quello posto agli inizi della nostra storia. Da allora, il dolore, la morte e tanti mali sono entrati nel mondo; da allora, gli uomini continuano a tradire l'amore del Signore.«¹

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¹ God created life: earth, sea, sun, moon and sky stars, plants, animals. Then He created man and entrusted the universe to his industrious hands. But Adam and Eve, the first men, rebelled against God. It was the first sin, the original sin, the one at the beginning of our history. Since then, pain, death and many evils have entered the world; since then, men have continued to betray the Lord's love. (Translation mine.)

At the same time, 3rd grade pupils in schools are supposed to learn about biological evolution and natural selection. How can an eight year Dold child reconcile those two visions?

In Italy, there is a school subject called *Insegnamento della religione cattolica* (IRC for short), which means Teaching of Catholic Religion. IRC is different from catechesis for it deals with the cultural features of (Italian) Roman Catholicism, which are assumed to be of interest also for non Christian pupils. Nonetheless it is not a compulsory subject (parents may ask for exemption). In practice it is fairly popular, more than 90% take it in primary schools.

Children taking IRC in 3rd grade are supposed to explore the myths of creation of various peoples and learn about the widespread religious dimensions of human experience (a context in which Roman Catholicism obviously fits). Moreover such exploration of religious experience should be linked to the topics explored in other parallel subjects such as History, Sciences, Italian Language, etc.

Hence one might hope that IRC might help our eight year old children to reconcile biological evolution with what they hear in their parishes.

However my feeling is that this reconciliation does not take place (nor it takes place later in secondary schools), possibly because it is still an open issue for adults. I am a mathematician, not a theologian, but I wonder whether speaking of the original sin in traditional terms can be meaningful today.

Situation in the media

I am going to report about a recent event in Italy. On February 27, 2017, »dj Fabo« commits assisted suicide in Switzerland. »Dj Fabo« stands for Fabiano Antoniani (1977-2017), an insurance broker later turned into a famous dj. A car accident in 2014 leaves him blind and quadriplegic. Three years later his tragic choice, supported by well known Italian advocates of the legalization of euthanasia in Italy. The resonance in the media is considerable, also because the Italian Parliament is currently debating on related issues.

Six days after the event also *L'ora di religione* («Religion hour« like Chemistry Class or some such thing) deals with it. *L'ora di religione* is a weekly radio program (on Sunday morning) broadcast by the Italian public network RAI.

The people invited to discuss on dj Fabo during the program are two journalists and two philosophers ... and yet this is the poster of the program that you find online:²

² www.radio1.rai.it/dl/portaleRadio/media/ContentItem-c3ef74b6-6434-4988-ba2b-36429cf60d60.html (01.09.2017).



(*Scienza VS Fede* means Science vs Faith).

My point is that a serious human and political issue like assisted suicide has been forced to become an issue related to science and faith, while it is related to neither (as confirmed by the selection of participants to the program).

It seems to me that a poor understanding of what science is all about goes hand in hand with a poor understanding of the basic tenets of (Christian) religion.

Situation in the academic community

I am going to tell something about the history of Catholic theology in Italy from the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, and the occupation of Rome in 1870, up to now.

Immediately after 1861 there is a drop in the number of students attending the Faculties of Theology existing in the territory of the new Kingdom. The Catholic Church does not trust the orthodoxy of universities run by the newly created state, and it is forbidden to establish private universities, for the strongly anticlerical ruling class – though formed by »Liberals« – is afraid of every freedom (such as the freedom of establishing private teaching institutions) which can possibly benefit its archenemy, the Roman Catholic Church.³ Catholic theological studies (mostly for clergy) will be pursued in the Italian seminaries preparing priests, and in the Pontifical universities (aimed at all the world).

³ The Waldensian (protestant) Faculty has already been established in Turin in 1855.

In 1873, three years after the occupation of Rome, the Faculties of Theology are abolished in all Italian universities (and this is the case still now).

More than fifty years later and after World War I, in 1929, long standing (pre- and post-Mussolini) negotiations aimed at a conciliation between Italy and the Holy See come to a positive conclusion by means of the Lateran Treaty (concerning the international prerogatives of the Holy See) and a Concordat (concerning the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Italy).

The Concordat, among other things, deals with the following:

1. Italy recognizes theology degrees conferred by pontifical faculties,
2. Catholic religion is taught in all Italian schools (by teachers appointed by the Church).

Roughly another fifty years later, in 1984, the 1929 Concordat is updated in consideration of the deep changes occurred in the Italian society and political institutions. In particular, there appears a new way of conceiving the teaching of Catholic religion in schools: it is the already mentioned IRC, no longer to be confused with catechesis, though taught by teachers approved by the Church (mostly lay teachers, by the way).

This new way of conceiving the role of Catholic religion in schools requires an improvement of the qualifications of the lay people involved with IRC. Hence starting from 1987, there is the establishment of many institutes for religious studies (currently described by the acronym ISSR⁴), supervised by the same Vatican congregation in charge of pontifical universities. An ISSR functions according to the 3+2 format of the Bologna process spread all over Europe. Its degrees are recognized by the Italian Government just for the purpose of teaching Catholic religion in schools, but are not considered equivalent to the degrees conferred by the Italian universities.

Today, in Italy, the outcome of this long process is the following plethora of Catholic institutions offering theological studies:⁵

- a) approximately 60 *studia theologica* (each supported by a diocese, or a consortium of dioceses) designed for the preparation of future priests; recall the role of seminaries after 1861
- b) approximately 10 theological faculties (some originating from former seminaries), established by the Holy See in various parts of Italy; recall that there are no such faculties in Italian universities
- c) approximately 20 pontifical universities with their own theological faculties
- d) approximately 80 ISSR.

⁴ *Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose*.

⁵ In fact the list is incomplete. E.g., I omit the so called theological schools for the laity.

Institutions listed in a) and d) have to be supervised by one of the theological faculties belonging to b) and c). Notice the separation between seminarists in a) and the laity in d).⁶

In my opinion, this is too much and too little at the same time: such a number of institutions seems excessive for 60 million Italians, and the fact that none of those institutions belongs to the Italian academic system reduces the cultural impact of Catholic theology in Italy.

Recommendations

Just two recommendations.

The *first* stems from some recent experience by SEFIR and can be indicated by the expression »pop theology«, that is, a theological speculation responsive to issues emerging from popular movies, novels, music, etc.

In April 2015, SEFIR organizes an event at the Pontifical Lateran University of Rome. It is a public debate on »Theology between science and science fiction« meant to investigate the stimuli that theological science can receive from contemporary science fiction. To our great surprise, more than 200 people show up from all parts of Italy. Many of them (including some defining themselves as non-believers) claim that it is time that some theologians take seriously the interesting religious sparks found both in science fiction and fantasy works (e.g., Harry Potter). A little book of proceedings is published, further meetings are organized, SEFIR's theologian Giuseppe Lorizio is interviewed on the topic by Vatican Radio Italy in June 2017.

I believe that we should be more attentive to what people *feel* (not necessarily *think*) about some basic problems related to faith and also to science. Popular movies, music, etc. can be of great help for this.

My *second* recommendation may not be very original but again stems from some recent experience by SEFIR.

Since 2012, every year SEFIR organizes a four day interdisciplinary school for about twenty young colleagues, mostly coming from the sciences and from engineering. For instance, the 2015 school dealt with automatic, biological and social learning. Unfortunately an interdisciplinary school seldom improves the curriculum of the average participant. However, with a proper format, actively involving all participants besides the senior speakers, we have been able to get a certain number of applications (there is a public call) and make a selection. We even had some people who were not particularly religious but seemed to enjoy also some theological talk.

⁶ The research project SEFIR, which I am currently directing, is based in a Roman ISSR called *Ecclesia Mater* put under the supervision of the theological faculty of the Pontifical Lateran University.

In my view, a real success was when the 2015 young participants (all by themselves) decided to reconvene for a follow-up meeting six months later, a meeting in which they were the main speakers and we were invited to attend as moderators and discussants. The same happened in 2016 and I expect it to become a tradition.

I believe that we should pay a constant attention to scientifically and technologically inclined youth, including youth who are not particularly religious, working with them in small interactive formats on relevant interdisciplinary issues.