

Book Review: *The Spiritual Itinerary of Georges Lemaître*¹

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書評：《喬治·愛德華·勒梅特的靈性之旅》

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Modern studies of the relationship between theology and science are now half a century old, and may be dated back to a seminal work by Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, first published in 1966. Others continued his pioneering work in the 1980s and 90s, and this topic has lately been something of a booming phenomenon in universities in Europe and America. Michael Fuller, an Anglican priest with a background in organic chemistry, in his article, “Science and Theology. An Introduction”² points out the difficulty of defining the term “religion”. Therefore many writers in the field prefer the term “theology”. Generally, “theology” seems to signify a way of thinking, of applying our rational selves to the asking of questions about God, and about the relationship of God

¹ Dominique Lambert, *L'itinéraire spirituel de Georges Lemaître. Suivi de “Univers et Atome”* (conférence inédite de G. Lemaître). *The Spiritual Itinerary of Georges Lemaître: Followed by “the Universe and the Atom”*, an unpublished talk of G. Lemaître. Brussels, Lessius, 2007, 222 pages.

² Michael Fuller, “Science and Theology: an Introduction”, *Chinese Cross Currents* 9-3 (July 2012) 116-123.

with the Universe we see around us—and with ourselves, as a part of that Universe. St Anselm of Canterbury described theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding,” a description which many have found helpful. The word “science” is similarly hard to define. But science can be characterized as a rational, objective, deterministic, and reductionist method or way of interrogating the world around us. According to Barbour, “science” and “theology” can interact in a fourfold way: conflict or opposition, independence, dialogue, and integration.

The astrophysicist Monsignor Georges Henri Joseph Édouard Lemaître (17 July 1894–20 June 1966) reflected a lot about this interaction between science and theology and tried to integrate both disciplines in his personal, scientific and apostolic life. He was a Belgian secular priest and canon, astronomer and professor of physics at the Catholic University of Louvain (Leuven). He was also the first person to propose the theory of the expansion of the Universe, widely misattributed to Edwin Hubble (1889–1953). He was also the first to derive what is now known as the Hubble's law and made the first estimation of what is now called the Hubble constant which he published in 1927, two years before Hubble's article. Lemaître proposed what became known as the “Big Bang” theory of the origin of the Universe, which he called the “hypothesis of the primeval atom.”

Father Lemaître is well-known for the above mentioned contributions to science, but less-known for his apostolic activities as a secular priest, in particular the accompaniment of Chinese students studying in Belgium and his rudimentary reflections on the interaction between science and theology. Similar to the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) under the influence of the Great War (1914–18), he had both a sacerdotal and scientific vocation. Lemaître was not a theologian, but a scientist in the first place. He

was a passionate reader of the spiritual works of Léon Bloy and Jan Van Ruusbroek. Professor Dominique Lambert's³ book *L'itinéraire spirituel de Georges Lemaître* narrates Lemaître's discreet but significant activities as a secular priest, fully compatible with his scientific activity at the University of Louvain.⁴ The author shows convincingly how an authentic spirituality is compatible with scientific research and how a believer, without any embarrassment, can be an actor in advanced scientific research.

In Chapter Five of his book Dominique Lambert focuses on Professor Lemaître's apostolic life, in particular his "Chinese connection" with the well-known Father Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940) and the Chinese students in Belgium. Since 1927 the young professor Lemaître during a retreat at the major seminary of Malines (Mechelen) experienced the call to spend some time with foreign students, besides his scientific research on the nebulae (galaxies). Originally, he was thinking about the International Circle of foreign students in Louvain. But particular historical circumstances decided otherwise.

Following the Great War, a number of Chinese students originally studying and working in France moved to Belgium as they lost their part-time jobs in the French factories. Moreover, from 1920 until 1927 Father Lebbe returned to Europe in order to take care of the Chinese students. Of the more than 400 Chinese students, who corresponded with Lebbe seeking assistance, about one third of them stayed in Belgium. In 1926, Lebbe established a "Chinese Home" for the 30 Chinese students studying in Louvain at Ladeuze Square. Lebbe received generous assistance from the Benedictine abbot of St. Andrew in Loppem near Bruges, Dom Theodore Nève, who he had

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⁴ I am indebted to Fr François Barriquand for pointing out this book to me.

met earlier in Rome during his theology studies. In the same year, a secular priest from Verviers, Father Boland, influenced by Lebbe, established a society of secular priests who were prepared to serve under the jurisdiction of Chinese bishops (The Society of the Auxiliaries of the Mission, SAM). Moreover, the ordination of the first six Chinese bishops in Rome on 28 October 1926, under the influence of Lebbe as well, enhanced the general interest of Belgian Catholics in China.

Lemaître was a colleague of the brother-in-law of Lebbe, Jacques Thoreau, a geologist and professor at the School of Engineers (University of Louvain) where Lemaître taught analytical mechanics. Thoreau undoubtedly influenced Lemaître in his concern for Chinese students. Moreover, the brother of Thoreau was a Benedictine monk at the monastery of St. Andrew. Earlier Lemaître had taught a young Chinese seminarian, introduced by Lebbe, French and catechism classes. In return the seminarian taught Lemaître the rudiments of Chinese during his stay at the House Saint Rombaut in Malines (1920–1923).

In July 1929, Msgr Ladeuze rector of the Catholic University of Louvain chose Lemaître to become his representative on the Sino-Belgian Interuniversity Committee, responsible for the allocation of scholarships to Chinese students in Belgium. On 11 October 1929, Lemaître was appointed director of the “Chinese Home.” He succeeded Father Boland, who earlier had contacted Lemaître to assist him in welcoming and accompanying Chinese students. Lemaître, a devoted member of the “Friends of Jesus” introduced this priestly fraternity to Boland. During a general assembly of this fraternity at the monastery of St. Andrew in Loppem in 1928, Lemaître met abbot Dom Nève. Both became good friends. One year earlier, the latter had established the “Chinese Catholic Foyer” of which Lemaître became a member.

Due to a difference of opinion between Lemaître and Boland about how to manage the Chinese Home, Lemaître resigned as director without any problem. Moreover, he continued to help Chinese students. Towards the end of the 1930s he integrated them in research projects at his laboratory. They collaborated with his research on the trajectories of cosmic rays, in particular his brilliant Chinese student Zhang Yongli 張永立 (1913–1972), who later became a professor of mathematics and physics at Yunnan University. In the 1950s, Lemaître headed the Academic Committee for Chinese Students in Louvain. During this time he had to deal with a good number of Chinese clergy coming to Louvain without the mandate of their bishops.

On the interaction between science and theology, Professor Lambert in two chapters: (6) To Protect Theology from Science? Two Ways towards a ‘Hidden God’ and (7) To Protect Science from Theology? The *Un’Ora* Affair⁵ illustrates how Father Lemaître’s ideas changed from a “concordant” or a synthetic view to a “discordant” or a methodological and radical separation of science from theology in the 1930s. Lemaître developed this “thesis of the two ways” (spiritual and natural) towards truth, following his “hypothesis of the primeval atom” in 1931. Lemaître’s modern distinction between transcendence (the domain of revelation and salvation) and immanence (the domain of science and astrophysics) was related to the biblical theme of the hidden God, “Deus absconditus.” Lemaître wrote, “I think that every one who believes in a supreme being supporting every being and every action, believes also that God is essentially hidden and may be glad to see how present physics provides a veil hiding the creation.” This modern

⁵ The *Un’Ora* was a controversial papal address on the hypothesis of a supernatural creation of the world based on the expanding model of the universe to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences by Pope Pius XII on 22nd November 1951.

conceptual and radical separation of science from theology did not exclude the possibility that the same believer can live both his scientific and religious vocations without being torn apart. The unity comes from the religious dimension of scientific research as such. In Lemaître's words, science is "truth-seeking at the service to God."

When it concerns the human being, Lemaître is not prepared to radicalize his "thesis of the two ways" or conceptual separation of science from theology. The scientific description of the human being also entails philosophical and ethical questions which physical cosmology does not encounter. Lemaître certainly shared Pope Paul VI's view of science as being fully respectful of the human. Lemaître accepts that scientific practices can be questioned from an ethical point of view and that human beings should never become victims of scientific progress.

In 1936 Lemaître became a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and in 1960 he was appointed president of the Academy. The presidency of Msgr Lemaître coincided with the last preparatory phases of the Second Vatican Council. Lemaître was very "ecumenical" minded so that a wide variety of scientists would be represented in the Academy and could inform the Pope directly about the most advanced domains of the sciences. At the same time, he was concerned about the autonomy of scientists within the Academy so that they could work according to their own methodologies without any restrictions or interference from the Church. Jesuit Father P. Teilhard de Chardin's ideas were different. The latter proposed to establish a "scientific commission," like the "Biblical commission," in order to inform authorities about the points one can be sure that humanity will take a stance on tomorrow... The two models of the "Academy" and the "Commission" remain the basic issue of the Church's present reflection on how to develop a proper relationship with the scientific community. According to Lambert, the choice of

an Academy rather than a Commission accords with Lemaître's ideas of the need for real openness towards the sciences without any attempts at assimilation or control by the Church magisterium.

Lemaître's "thesis of the two ways" corresponds to the conclusion of the Anglican cleric Michael Fuller, namely that "despite this recognition that there can be a number of ways of viewing the relationship between science and theology, there appears to be a common perception that these disciplines are radically different, and that they must be opposed to one another." Professor Dominique Lambert in his concluding chapter: When the star stops presents Monsignor Lemaître as a double star. Still, Lambert's last sentence of his excellent book: "the father of the Big Bang and the "Friend of Jesus" have never stopped being the same star," shows how this radical opposition can be reconciled in one and the same person.