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Stanley Jaki

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Stanley Jaki

Abstract

An article written by Jeff Ploegstra for the book *Dictionary of Christianity and Science*, published by Zondervan. ISBN: 9780310496052

Keywords

Stanley Jaki, priests, scholars, worldview, science

Disciplines

Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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JAKI, STANLEY. The Reverend Dr. Stanley Jaki (1924–2009) was born in Győr, Hungary. Jaki attended the Jedlik Preparatory School and Junior College and in 1942 joined the order of St. Benedict. In 1947 he completed undergraduate work in philosophy, theology, and **mathematics** and moved to Rome for graduate study in theology at the Pontifical Institute of San Elmo. In 1948 he was ordained a priest, and in 1950 he completed a doctorate with his thesis “Les tendances nouvelles de l’ecclésiologie” (New Trends in Ecclesiology).

From 1951 to 1954, Jaki taught systematic theology at the School of Theology of St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, where he also earned a bachelor of science degree. Jaki then began doctoral work in **physics** at Fordham University under the mentorship of Nobel laureate Victor Hess. In 1958 he completed his degree; the core of his thesis was published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research* as “A Study of the Distribution of Radon, Thoron, and Their Decay Products above and below the Ground.”

Postdoctoral study in the history and **philosophy of science** at Stanford and UC Berkeley immediately preceded publication of his seminal work *The Relevance of Physics* (1966).

In 1965 he joined the faculty at Seton Hall, where he remained till his death. While there, Jaki became an internationally recognized scholar, serving as a fellow and guest lecturer at numerous institutions. Perhaps his most notable landmarks were appointments in 1974–75 and 1975–76 as the Gifford lecturer at the University of Edinburgh.

Jaki contributed to a variety of fields as evidenced by his receipt of the Lecomte du Nouy Medal (1970), the Templeton Prize (1987), and nine honorary doctorates spanning literature, systematic theology, science, and law. Jaki’s most well-known contributions to the faith-and-science discourse are captured in two of his major works, *The Relevance of Physics* and *Science and Creation* (1974).

The Relevance of Physics is a historical analysis of the methods and limitations of exact science, particularly regarding physics. Jaki describes the implications of the heavy reliance of the natural sciences on “first order logic” and mathematics. He later explores these implications within the interaction of physics with theology, philosophy, other

sciences, and society in general. Significant threads from his later works can be traced back to this work. Most notably, stemming from his analysis of **Duhem**, **Quine**, and others, he elaborates on important aspects of the underdetermination of scientific theory by fact. He also articulates an application of Gödel’s incompleteness theorem to physics (see **Gödel’s Theorem**) and a “theory of everything.”

Jaki’s later and more widely read *Science and Creation* explores what he calls “the invariable stillbirths of the scientific enterprise” in a variety of historical cultures. The main thrust of the book elaborates on ideas from **Pierre Duhem’s** “*Système du Monde*” (1914). Jaki’s historical/philosophical analysis of the importance of a Christocentric, monotheistic **worldview**, and specifically the doctrine of creation, as the only “viable birth” of the scientific enterprise in medieval Europe has been met with, in his own words, both jubilation and scorn (Jaki 2002).

In later works, Jaki explored the intersections of science and religion, believing that the two were more deeply interdependent than most scientists or theologians would care to admit and that “science naturally opened out toward the affirmation of faith” (Tobin 2009).

Father Jaki died of a heart attack in Madrid, Spain, on April 7, 2009, returning from a lecture at the headquarters of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

Jeffrey T. Ploegstra

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