

The Speech of Luca Coscioni
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The Catholic Church is greatly responsible for the hold-ups in the progress of science, hold-ups which even those who believe in other things besides powers and prayers are able to recognize without any difficulty. A significant episode very clearly demonstrates how things have not at all changed since Galileo's time. Professor Steven Hawking, one of the greatest living physicists who was struck in 1962 with the same disease from which I suffer, myotrophic lateral sclerosis, tells us about this episode that happened in 1981, when his interest in the origins of the universe was aroused by the invitation to participate in a conference on cosmology in the Vatican. During an audience with Pope John Paul II, following the conference, the participating scientists were reminded by the Pope that while it is just to study the evolution of the universe after the Big Bang, they should not inquire into the Big Bang itself because that is the precise instant of Creation, thus it is the work of God.

Hawking's speech at the conference had dealt precisely with the possibility that the universe had never had a beginning and thus had had no instant of Creation. The English physicist held that if we go back in time we reach the uniqueness of the Big Bang where the laws of physics can go no further. However another direction in time exists that we can follow and which avoids this uniqueness. It is called the direction of imaginary time. Thus if the universe had had a beginning, Hawking continues, we could presume that there had been a Creator. But if the universe is entirely contained in itself, without having any boundaries or limits, then it is not possible to imagine either a beginning or an end. It exists, stop. So what role could a Creator have had?

Certainly Steven Hawking, just as all the other scholars of cosmology, was not at that time and is not now interested in demonstrating the existence or non-existence of God, but rather in searching for the possible origins of the universe. Nevertheless, in order to avoid misunderstandings the Holy Father, speaking *ex cathedra* to the scientists 21 years ago, hastened to specify that there was absolutely no reason for them to search before the Big Bang.

Obviously the relationship between science and religion was and continues to be very difficult, if not impossible. Two emblematic examples of this difficult relationship are Giordano Bruno who was burnt at the stake and Galileo who was forced to abjure even if, as I already mentioned above,

the Vatican's anathema continue in the field of cosmology into our time. At any rate, it seems that lately bioethics offers the most fertile ground for the conservative Catholic's incursions. A term that precisely makes one shudder in the Catholic acceptance.

The Pope's recent visit to the Italian Parliament was clearly a political intervention and so it must be interpreted as such. It is legitimate and worthy of respect as are all political interventions and different religious and moral convictions. This elderly Pope, who is not in such poor health as he is depicted to be, possesses the tenacity and perseverance of many other ill people who like him fight a daily battle against disease, pain and prejudice. Parkinson's disease has not been able to bend the legs or still the voice of Pope John Paul II. His visit to the Parliament was a full-fledged political intervention, or it almost was. In fact the Pontiff neglected mentioning the weakest beings among the weak : ill persons. This does not surprise me.

The Catholic Church has great responsibilities for the hold-ups accumulated by scientific research in biotechnology and in particular in the research being carried out on therapeutic cloning and in the studies on embryos whether or not they are in excess.

What could he have said to people who are ill today and to the so-called healthy people who are tomorrow's potentially ill after the Vatican had referred to these researchers as demons and treated them as sorcerers? How could he speak of these lives after a systematic clerical offensive had sustained that the weakest being among the weak is a frozen embryo, which had never been born, but perhaps was already dead, quote unquote, because it had been thrown into the rubbish? Therefore the Pontiff's silence must not surprise us.

My book is an open book about the theme of liberty in scientific research that is presently on the Italian Parliament's agenda just as it is on that of the major national Parliaments and governments in the world. I am always more aware that it is only a radical drop of water. But it is a drop that must be nourished if we do not want to lose it.

I will be very happy if you read my book "Il Maratoneta - Storia di una Battaglia di Libertà" that has been published in the series *Eretica* by Stampa Alternativa. I will be even happier if, after having read it, you decide to fight this political battle by my side. In what way can we fight together? You can become a member of the Associazione Luca Coscioni per la Libertà Scientifica. Thank you for your kind attention. I have concluded.