

INTERVIEW WITH FR. JAVIER SÁNCHEZ CAÑIZARES, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NAVARRA

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “If science and religion wish to address each other, both need the common ground provided by philosophy. Even though philosophy itself is hardly a well-defined discipline, it behooves her an attitude of criticism and clarification that helps purify both poles of the science and religion dialogue.”
- “We share with our fellow men and women a pilgrimage: not only the pilgrimage of faith but the pilgrimage of truth. Thus, ethical and intellectual humbleness is a prerequisite should one make progress in the adventure of research.”

Would you describe where you work, and some of the particularities of your university?

As a professor, I work at the University of Navarra (UNAV). Currently, I run the CRYF Group (CRYF is the Spanish acronym for “Science, Reason, and Faith”) and am also a researcher of the “Mind-Brain” Group at the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS)--one of the several research institutes in UNAV. As a priest incardinated in the Prelature of Opus Dei, I develop some pastoral work related to groups of students and professors of UNAV. I celebrate mass and attend the confessional daily at a residence of professors and periodically preach recollections and retreats.

One may easily recognize the Christian inspiration behind the academic work at UNAV, in keeping with its founder’s desire. Saint Josemaría was insistent on the harmony between faith and reason and envisaged the university as a privileged place to provide newer generations of Christians with the intellectual and moral tools to live their faith in the middle of the world, also in academia.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Father Javier Sánchez Cañizares, a Professor at the University of Navarra, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on the intersection between theology, philosophy, and physics.

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The CRYF and the ICS embody such ideals. I would also like to mention here the courses offered by the Core Curriculum Institute for the whole university, which aim to build intellectual bridges between the curricula of sciences and humanities and heal the wounds of excessive specialization.

What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

Had I to pick out one specific field, I am more inclined to select Philosophy of Physics. However, let me introduce some caveats to explain this choice. First, I am far more interested in the Philosophy of Physics as an updated Philosophy of Nature than as an epistemology. In that sense, I endeavor to retrieve the classical Galileo-like view of the physicist as a philosopher of nature. Second, when reflecting on the philosophical presuppositions and results of Physics, there is plenty of room to provide new insights for emerging specific fields, like the philosophy of neurosciences and the philosophy of mind, and for broader frameworks, like the science and religion dialogue.

The fact of myself being a physicist and theologian may provide the short answer to why I chose Philosophy of Physics. However, I think there are also deeper reasons in my case. Mariano Artigas, the late founder of the CRYF Group, deemed philosophy as the central partner for the science and religion dialogue to successfully develop. I agree with that view. If science and religion wish to address each other, both need the common ground provided by philosophy. Even though throughout history philosophy itself is hardly a well-defined discipline, it behooves her an attitude of criticism and clarification that helps purify both poles of the science and religion dialogue.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

Let me first explain something. When I entered the science and religion field, I felt astonished by the amount of space devoted by believers to come to terms with evolution. To be honest, I can hardly understand how one can focus on discussing the problem of the emergence of life or even the emergence of man on earth just from Biology and Theology. As far as we know, life is an extremely rare phenomenon in a huge universe. Do we really aim to make progress in the science and religion dialogue without heeding at the deeper dynamics of nature? Physics cares about that. Even if it assumes its own methodological reduction, it is intrinsically open to the whole reality and can eventually focus on all phenomena that interact with us, human beings, no matter how indirect such interaction may turn out to be.

I received one of the 2018 Expanded Reason Awards in the category of research for my book “Universo Singular”. This work deals with the most relevant problems that emerge in our physical knowledge of reality and offer a renewed agenda of topics for philosophical and theological reflection on nature. The book hinges upon the concept of ‘singularity’ and how it can be applied analogously to the universe in general, the existence of complex systems, the emergence of mind, and our specific knowledge of nature from its most fundamental description. The goal was to introduce the uniqueness of each problem in a comprehensible fashion, avoiding simplifications or inaccuracies that would displease readers with scientific expertise. My target was an academic audience and the educated public who want to delve, from the common ground of our scientific knowledge, into the image of a world created by God.

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

Teachers, both in prep school and academia, face enormous difficulties today. For me, one of the most demanding challenges stems from the burden to get the audience “motivated”. Students live in a world soaked with continuous stimuli and lack the resources to build their own hierarchy of topics worth their attention. Thus, teachers spend a lot of energy just trying to catch the students’ attention. Teachers strive for entering their students’ field of interest, as in a theater, and the teaching content consequently becomes downplayed. It is illusory to think that teaching may fix something when many families and society, in general, deem college just a means to fight for what really matters in life for their sons, namely, money and success. In front of the latter, knowledge and wisdom appear like empty words of long by-gone eras.

More specifically, I think that one of the most acute problems relies on finding a common language from which to set up the relevant questions and problems that may eventually lead to acknowledge the ethical, intellectual, or religious values in human life. On top of that, in my view, there is an extended prejudice in Spain when a priest speaks as it is generally thought that, at some point, he will sneak some religious stuff in to try to proselytize or, worse yet indoctrinate you. To recap, one needs to invest much strength in overcoming the initial conditions –to use a physical image– of our students. However, once the right contact is made, they passionately live on the values they were actually seeking.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

I would say that a religious person, specifically a Christian, is someone open to truth, no matter where it comes from. We Christians know only too well that we do not possess the truth; the Truth possesses you instead. Because of that, we share with our fellow men and women a pilgrimage: not only the pilgrimage of faith but the pilgrimage of truth. Thus, ethical and intellectual humbleness is a prerequisite should one make progress in the adventure of research. Since the truth is ultimately one, faith and reason mutually strengthen each other in the two-fold movement of *intellectus quaerens fidem* and *fides quaerens intellectum*. In my case, I can neither believe without reason nor think without faith.

On the one hand, within the science and religion dialogue, it is not uncommon to face fundamentalist stances in both slants. Scientists unable to see beyond their specific discipline, who fall into the trap of scientism, and religious people who cling to their representations of the contents of the faith. On the other hand, I hardly understand why many scientists, philosophers and theologians show themselves uninterested in the worldview provided by these germane disciplines. Usually, they use an (alleged) unrelatedness of methodologies as an excuse. In academia, in practical terms, for many reasons that I cannot unpack here, interdisciplinary research is seen with suspicion by many and penalized in mainstream funded research. Even if university authorities praise interdisciplinary research in public speeches, they ultimately pay lip service to such endeavors. One remarkable exception is the Francisco de Vitoria University, which has become exemplary with its effort in promoting and funding the Expanded Reason Awards.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic and are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

First, I could not stress enough how important they are for the Church. Even though they will feel solitude and lack of understanding, they are witnessing how reason and faith may combine in the human person to ultimately reach a unity of intellectual life. In that sense, they will become beacons for many believers throughout their lives. Of course, there is a specific vocation within the richness of charisms distributed by the Holy Ghost and they will need, perhaps more than any other, the continuous feeding of the Liturgy and the sacraments and the help of their own communities. The Catholic scientist does need to live in the Church as a living communion, far from individualistic temptations.

Second, I ask them to not ever be afraid of seeking the truth. I am not only referring here to the ultimate truth but to the truth of a concrete problem. We live in a tough world where easy solutions are frequently provided to maintain the status quo. They will need a huge amount of mental strength to keep their way. Undoubtedly, everybody should be open to the advice of others, but it is important to find the right personal balance, which means that each of us has some personal contribution to offer. Please, do not quench the fire of research and subside into the public agenda. If I may borrow St Ignatius of Antioch's words about Christianity, *non opus persuasionis sed magnitudinis*, I think they can also apply to scientific research in its quest for truth.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I was born in Córdoba, started to study Physics in Seville and, after meeting Opus Dei in a student residence of that city, I joined this institution in 1991 as a numerary member. I did my PhD in Physics in Madrid, at the Autonomous University, with work on the critical current of superconductors and, afterward, I went to Rome to study Theology and, eventually, being ordained in 2005. All those steps were quite natural for me, as I have always been very much interested in the quest for understanding the world. After studying Physics, Philosophy and Theology appeared as natural companions in my intellectual maturation. Regarding the ordination as a priest, it was also natural for me as another way of serving in Opus Dei, assuming that God and the Church were gently asking for it.

In the wake of my ordination and completion of another PhD in Theology, on God's revelation in creation according to the patristic comments to the Areopagus speech, I moved to the University of Navarra, in Pamplona, where I have remained during all these last years. I initially taught Moral Theology, but very soon shifted to Philosophy and the CRYF Group. Perhaps I felt a bit disappointed by what I perceived as a bit bland research in Theology and the call from science was still pretty alive in me. The possibility to engage in the science and religion dialogue at the CRYF, with the complement of the Mind-Brain Group at the ICS, definitely took the lead in my intellectual path.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

My father usually tells a story about me that I do not remember well but must be true. When just a boy, I apparently used to say I wanted to study science to understand God. Certainly, I should add many nuances to such claim after coming of age –actually one never comes of age in these matters– but the central message remains. I do believe that science is a privileged way to understand God and, because of that, an essential partner in the dialogue between man and God started so many years ago. Of course, if science is seen as just a means to take control over nature and convert its achievements into technological gadgets, one may scorn that claim. The paradigm of technoscience does not seem to deem understanding, not to say contemplation, an end in itself. But I think that the fathers of modern science would share a view more akin to the innocent claim of my childhood.

As you were asking for something more personal about which I am more passionate, I must add something. I would say that I am not passionate about things but people. I am passionate about my friends and, in that sense, I am pretty much in line with the classical Aristotelian and Christian philosophy. Moreover, I consider friendship, together with Liturgy, the privileged access of God to people's hearts. Maybe for that reason, the scientific exchange should also take place in a friendly atmosphere to reach its utmost meaning.