

## The Astronomer's Faith

John F. Haught | DECEMBER 6, 2010

Galileo

Watcher of the Skies

By David Wootton

Yale University Press. 354p \$35

Commenting on the Roman Inquisition's prosecution of Galileo (1633), Dava Sobel, the celebrated author of *Galileo's Daughter*, writes that "no other process in the annals of canon or common law has ricocheted through history with more meanings, more consequences, more conjecture, more regrets." A similar mélange of interpretations also muddles attempts to arrive at an accurate portrait of the man Galileo Galilei himself (1564-1642). David Wootton's well-researched biography *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies* hardly clears things up, but it does make for fascinating reading. Four centuries after Galileo published *The Starry Messenger*, the first scientific bestseller, we know much more about the skies than we do about the watcher. Wootton, however, turns the Tuscan's telescope around and looks into the expansive mystery of Galileo's own mind. And he professes to have found in that measureless domain the morning star of post-Christian modernity.

A scholar of modern intellectual history who now teaches at the University of York, Wootton rewards readers with enough information and titillating conjecture to hold our interest throughout. His treatment of the watcher will not serve as an introduction, but to readers already familiar with Galileo and his trial it provides important details and colorful commentary.

It also offers a whole new angle on the Watcher himself: Galileo as atheist. "Galileo's central but unspoken claim," Wootton asserts, "was that if one had a proper idea of nature then one could dispense with the Christian idea of an omnipotent, providential God who had created the universe and would judge the souls of men..." Although Galileo may have left room for an indifferent Platonic mathematician, he did not, Wootton claims, believe in the responsive God of the Bible. We should respect Galileo, therefore, as one of the great secular heroes of the modern world.

To save his own skin, Galileo had to conceal his "heretical" Copernican understanding of the heavens, so it should not surprise us that he privatized his doubts about Heaven as well. In his inner life, Wootton proposes, Galileo had to have been a nonbeliever. It fits the author's picture of Galileo's fundamental impiety that the world's first great scientist seems hardly ever to have gone to church, expressed devotion to Jesus and the saints, worried about redemption or had much interest in any theological issues. Moreover, Wootton adopts Pietro Redondi's dubious speculation that Galileo's atomism—a philosophy of nature taken to be irreconcilable with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation—was the main, though never publicly acknowledged, reason for Galileo's being condemned for heresy.

But for Wootton Galileo was much more than a heretic. He was also at heart a non-Christian who secretly harbored a defiance of deity indistinguishable from late modern scientific skepticism. Wootton finds it simply inconceivable that Galileo was the good, though admittedly flawed, Catholic that Sobel and "liberal" Catholic historians have generally taken for granted. Galileo apparently could not really have meant, for example, that religious truth can be rescued from literalist interpretations of biblical cosmology, as argued brilliantly in the theologically sophisticated "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina."

A half dozen times or more Wootton presents Galileo's virtual godlessness as simply a matter of logical deduction: Since a central tenet of Christian faith is that the universe was created for us human beings, Galileo's Copernicanism invalidates any such doctrine once and for all. The new astronomy manifestly loosens our planet from its former post of Ptolemaic, Platonic and Christian centrality, allowing Earth and its inhabitants to stray into the infinite emptiness of impersonal space. Could someone as intelligent as Galileo possibly have failed to realize that the end of geocentrism signals the end of Christian faith as well? Forget about Darwin and biology; in Galileo's inner life astronomy had already routed Christianity's God.

The poet John Donne, Wootton says, grasped the real implications of Copernicanism right away. In 1612, only two years after the publication of *The Starry Messenger*, and—as Wootton reasonably speculates—after having possibly met with Galileo in Venice several years earlier, Donne composed his famous poem “An Anatomy of the World.” In it he expressed sadness that the new astronomy, along with the materialist atomism espoused by Galileo, “calls all in doubt,” causing the sun and the earth to be “lost,” implying that the formerly cozy human centered universe is now “all in pieces, all coherence gone....” Surely Galileo must have drawn the same conclusions privately!

With this highly adventurous portrayal of Galileo's inner world, Wootton assures himself a high rank among the most radical recent Galileo interpreters. He also guarantees that readers will wonder just what is going on in his own “inner life” as he presents so simplistic a measure of Galileo's mind. Undoubtedly Wootton makes an important contribution to Galileo scholarship, and his book deserves to be taken seriously if only for the useful information it lays out about Galileo's life and thought. Though full of guesses, it reflects an enormous amount of illuminating research. But as its author must surely have anticipated, many readers will find his text much less noteworthy than its subtext, which emerges into the full daylight when the book reaches its penultimate chapter, provocatively titled “Galileo's (Un)belief.”

What is really going on in the author's mind that he so confidently introduces Galileo into the company of modern unbelievers? Judging from previous works, it seems that Wootton's scholarly agenda has for some time been one of looking for the seeds of fashionable present-day atheism in what he takes to be the anti-Christian sentiments of early modern thinkers. During their own lifetimes these skeptics could not state with impunity what they really thought about God, so it is now the responsibility of intellectual historians to bring their suppressed suspicions out into the open.

Galileo, then, is one of several early modern secular heroes ripe for proper recognition in our Dawkins-defined epoch of atheistic permissiveness. It is not without interest that in 1983 Wootton published a book on Paolo Sarpi, the Venetian Servite priest known especially for his anti-Curial account of the Council of Trent. Sarpi's intense hostility toward papal authority and clerical wealth is for Wootton suggestive of an irreverence incompatible with Catholic belief. Significantly, while teaching at Padua early in his career, Galileo became a close friend of Sarpi, whose iconoclasm must have been contagious.

Wootton's assumption that Galileo's science and his conflict with the church entail unbelief, however, renders this book highly suspect as intellectual history. There is not space here to point out all that is

wrong with its main theme and the feeble arguments marshaled to support it. Suffice it to say that its major premise is false, since Christianity has never formally taught that the universe was created ultimately for “man,” but for the glory of God instead. It is our acknowledgment of God’s glory that glorifies us. Authentic Christian faith has always entailed the de-centralizing of our egos, and for that very reason the modern scientific disclosure of an endlessly expansive Copernican universe provides more reason than ever for glorifying the Creator.

More important, however, no indisputable evidence exists that Galileo’s inner life was at any point bereft of theologically orthodox sentiments. In fact, early on Galileo explicitly gave “thanks to God” for allowing him to be the revealer of “marvels kept hidden in obscurity for all previous centuries.” To suppose with Wootton that Galileo did not really mean to give thanks for God’s “kindness” is condescending at best.

It is especially troubling that Wootton makes so little of the fact that in his last years, while under house arrest at Arcetri outside of Florence, Galileo expressed contrition for his failings and that he attended the Mass said daily by his faithful disciple Benedetto Castelli, a Benedictine priest and eventually Abbott of Monte Cassino. Castelli would certainly have been shocked, as would most of his contemporaries, at Wootton’s groundless speculations that prior to Galileo’s late religious renewal he must privately have been an intellectual opponent of Christianity.

It is not inapposite to point out that Castelli himself, along with most other early modern scientists, received the Copernican revolution as completely consistent with theistic belief. So also, we may assume, did Galileo’s daughter. For, as Sobel rightly concludes from reading the surviving letters of Sur Maria Celeste to her father, “Galileo remained a good Catholic who believed in the power of prayer and endeavored always to conform his duty as a scientist with the destiny of his soul.” In support, Sobel cites Galileo’s Third Letter on Sunspots, in which he had remarked long before his arrest that we should accept our lives “as the highest gift from the hand of God.... Indeed, we should accept misfortune not only in thanks, but in infinite gratitude to Providence, which by such means detaches us from an excessive love for Earthly things and elevates our minds to the celestial and divine.”

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