

The Catholic Church and Galileo
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The Catholic Church and the Galileo controversy: acclaimed scientist attests to a distortion of history
Church pressured to retreat into silence

On two recent occasions Pope Benedict XVI has recognized Galileo's role in the advance of science. In his Epiphany Homily he recalled that exploration of the stars, indeed of science per se, should not lead to confusion between creation and the Creator. Galileo, understanding that the universe is truly governed by love, did not make such a mistake. Scripture tells us that the magi followed a star to where they found Jesus and adored him as humanity's King. For them, the star, a marvel of nature, was not an end in itself.

The Pope's Angelus Message on 21 December 2008 also included a greeting to participants in events to commemorate the International Year of Astronomy (2009), that coincide with the fourth centenary of Galileo's first observations by telescope. The Pontiff commented that "Among my Predecessors... there were some who studied this science". And together with all those versed in the empirical sciences we become increasingly aware how "the laws of nature" are "a great incentive to contemplate the works of the Lord with gratitude" (L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 24/31 December 2008, p. 1).

Notwithstanding the widespread belief that there is an ongoing "clash" between faith and science the Holy Father continues to speak of a positive relationship between them.

Dr David C. Lindberg, Hilldale Professor emeritus of the History of Science at the University of Wisconsin, U.S.A., and a foremost authority on the Galileo dispute, takes an interesting approach to the matter. Dr Lindberg describes himself as a "liberal Protestant" who is convinced that society has inherited a deliberately flawed version of facts related to Galileo.

The Catholic Church, he maintains, has to a great extent been wrongly vilified. Regrettably, there are few who attempt to properly analyze the historical data.

This author questioned Dr Lindberg on his point of view.

1. Does the issue of the Galileo controversy concern you personally?

The issue does touch me on a very personal level because as a research scholar and teacher I am obligated to identify and promote the accuracy of the historical record. Acting to correct misconception is a crucial dimension of my educator's role. I think, for example, of the famed Roger Bacon (c. 1214–92), the English Franciscan friar who is generally considered to be the founder of modern experimental science. He recognized that while mythology has a value for the pursuit of classical history and culture, some mythologies which are presumed to be factually true have filtered into popular consciousness. But they are not true in that sense and this must be emphasized. There is a duty incumbent upon the scholar of science to expose why certain myths have been so readily embraced on the popular level. Permit me to illustrate.

There is a common notion that medieval society thought of the earth as being flat. This is erroneous. Numerous academics during the Middle Ages were quite familiar with the learning traditions of the Ancients and especially their legacy concerning geometry and mathematics and the application of these to cosmology (the study of the cosmos, for example, the heavens) and to the structure of the earth. Most Christian thinkers accepted the wisdom which long dismissed any notion of a flat earth.

But why did such a view of Medieval ignorance prevail? This can be traced directly to an 1828 work by American author and biographer, Washington Irving (1783-1859), *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Irving is the originator of this precise myth. And since his publications circulated widely during his day, his "myth" was eagerly welcomed by a public which was thoroughly disposed to degrade the Medieval period as the Dark Ages. Their bias, reinforced by Irving, was that the "darkness" of an autocratic Catholic Church opposed reason and oppressed scientific inquiry. History, however, demonstrated otherwise. But respect for historical reliability was omitted.

And we see a similar situation in terms of Galileo. Generations of commentators have been content to declare that the Church pitted itself against Galileo because the Church was threatened by science and thus became the inevitable enemy of almost every advance in science and technology. The myth abides. I invite you to read my essay, "Galileo, the Church, and the Cosmos", to evaluate the complexity of what pertained to Galileo and the Church's approach to him. I propose to challenge the usual version of what happened and of what did characterize the Church's attitude (see Chapter 2 of, *When Science and Christianity Meet*, coedited by David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, University of Chicago Press, 2003).

2. The essay to which you refer mentions the negative influence of Andrew Dickson White on the customary interpretation of the Galileo controversy. Who is White?

White (1832-1918) was Professor of History at the University of Michigan and subsequently became the first President of Cornell University (New York). In 1896, he published, "A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom". As expressed by the title, the Church, particularly during the Medieval epoch was judged severely. White's discussion of Galileo portrayed him as the culminating point of those prior centuries when the Church dominated, manipulated, and betrayed Western intellectual thought.

White's claim was that the Church's anti-scientific stance accelerated during the 18th and 19th centuries, though rebuked by such Enlightenment philosophers as Voltaire. White's work was reprinted extensively and his position was adopted uncritically in academic and media circles. But his underlying agenda seems to have consisted of an obsession to denounce religion's engagement in higher education, notably wherever science was involved.

3. Is this distortion of the historical data with regards to Galileo pervasive?

Definitely. I am familiar with instances when normally moderate and objective producers of educational video resources react with sheer disdain towards any scholar who is inclined to refute the image of the Church as the bully of Galileo and those like-minded.

Few have the courage to resist the Catholic bashing which is considered justifiable when the name of Galileo surfaces. It is also interesting to observe that other Christian denominations and religious

traditions are "assaulted" to a far less degree.

4. Is tolerance in contemporary colleges and universities itself a myth?

Not infrequently. Some on our campuses assert that tolerance is now defined as a willingness to conform to the pressure of having to endorse whatever prejudice is most recent and rampant. To differ can lead to loss of promotion, distrust from publishers, and the "cold shoulder" from prestigious conferences and organizations; in short, to career death.

5. Are there lessons which the Galileo scenario still imparts to us?

There are many lessons. I am struck by two. First, people must learn to read critically and not to automatically "buy into" any printed word which happens to fit those preconceived ideas which they hope to confirm. And second, being a teacher and being a student both entail responsibility. Be cautious when a classroom starts to function as a medium to disseminate what amounts to subjective emotionalism and unsubstantiated tenets, disguised as academic-sounding rhetoric. Being impressionable is not a sign of intellectual maturity. Nor is susceptibility an index to measure educational progress.

6. Your essay, "The Beginnings of Western Science", suggests that political and ideological undercurrents habitually lurk beneath the externals of scientific controversy. Can this be said of Galileo?

Without the slightest doubt. Honesty requires us to admit that the Protestant Reformers and their heirs found in their rendition of the Galileo scenario a great opportunity to undermine the Catholic Church's credibility and authority. For example, there is ample evidence in the British scholarship of the 18th and 19th centuries that Catholicism deserved to be marginalized and to become ultimately extinct.

The so-called anti-Catholic laws furthered exactly this intent, and the Galileo saga was enlisted to sanction it. Americans of the time were prone to concur. Today, secular scholars realize that Galileo can again be conveniently incorporated into what is often their anti-Church and anti-religion platform. Society at large, perhaps persuaded by the media regarding Church inconsistencies and moral lapses, seldom tends to object.

7. Dr Lindberg, you give the impression that many scientists uphold science to be the sole norm for determining how society must think and act. Please comment.

Once more considering the Galileo case, if one insists that the Church has no right to address scientific questions then there is absolutely no incentive to re-evaluate where doubt arises concerning the authenticity of documentation relating to Galileo or how his trial and the recantation which he signed should be assessed according to the unique historical milieu and circumstances. Some maintain that such a step would represent no more than the revival of a memory of a last-ditch stance by the Church to exert its power of influence. This was a struggle in which the Church was defeated by the pro-science constituency, convinced that, after Galileo, the Church can do no more than to retreat into the silence of its delusion and fantasy. Hence, the Church has no choice but to concede the forum of public allegiance to science and its advocates.

Such is somewhat of a synthesis of the perspective which we typically encounter. But it is both weak and deficient. For it would deny the contribution of countless scientists, living and deceased, whose

commitment to their Church and faith has been profoundly rational (e.g. the Augustinian Abbot, Gregor Mendel, the founder of genetics, Fr George Lemaitre who proposed the Big Bang theory, Blessed Francesco Fa di Bruno, etc.). The defense of truth must never succumb to becoming a caricature of truth. Such would be at least as unfortunate as accusations levelled against the Church which are culled from superficial deductions extracted from a fiction that the Church persecuted Galileo relentlessly.

Taken from:

L'Osservatore Romano

Weekly Edition in English

4 February 2009, page 15

L'Osservatore Romano is the newspaper of the Holy See.

The Weekly Edition in English is published for the US by:

The Cathedral Foundation

L'Osservatore Romano English Edition

320 Cathedral St.

Baltimore, MD 21201

Subscriptions: (410) 547-5315

Fax: (410) 332-1069

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