

## WAS GALILEO REALLY PERSECUTED BY THE CHURCH?

The Truth Will Shock You: It Was NOT the Church Which Persecuted Galileo But His Fellow Scientists!

Demolishing a Modern Myth...

There is a widespread myth which almost every school science teacher will use when he introduces his pupils to the subject of Galileo. Let us allow Philip J. Sampson to relate it for us:

'The plot is the war between religion and science, and it is presented to us, not with the facts, but through the adventures of a charismatic individual. Armed only with a telescope and reason, plucky Galileo stood against the might of the Church. He was tortured by the Inquisition, condemned as a heretic, and wasted away in a prison cell; Italian science floundered. The main drawback to this plot is that most of it is untrue.'

(Philip J. Sampson, *Six Modern Myths*, ch 1, p 29-30, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

Outstanding 1970s philosophy of science writer Paul Feyerabend refused to be taken in by the usual myths about Galileo, writing this:

"The trial of Galileo was one of many trials. It had no special features except perhaps that Galileo was treated rather mildly, despite his lies and attempts at deception. But a small clique of intellectuals aided by scandal-hungry writers succeeded in blowing it up to enormous dimensions so that what was basically an altercation between an expert and an institution defending a wider view of things now looks almost like a battle between heaven and hell." (p. 127, 'Against Method,' fourth edition. This is the paperback version of just under 300 pages, with an Introduction from Ian Hacking, and published by Verso of London and New York).

As we are going to see, the popular story about a powerful and superstitious Church fighting against the brilliant science of Galileo is very largely a myth of rationalist modernism.

Now the 'Church' which I refer to in this article is the 17th century Roman Catholic Church and some may wonder why I would want to defend them, but I think that all Christian Apologetics must always strive to uphold the truth. The Galileo myth is used by modernist atheists and scoffers to attack the record of Christianity and I really think that we should all honestly consider the real evidence and not popular modernist spin.

Sometimes the popular myth is embellished even further and we are presented with the tale that Galileo invented the telescope and was the very first man to look at the heavens with one. In fact, of course, the telescope was invented by Johann Lippersheim in 1605 and Galileo almost certainly was not the first man to consult the heavens through a telescope lens, we do not know who that was, but the Englishman Thomas Harriot certainly observed the moon through a telescope around 1609.

Another myth is that Galileo conclusively proved that the earth orbits the sun – but it was not yet possible to deduce that much in Galileo's day, as several scholars are starting to admit. In fact, Galileo's research was concerned with sun spots, the phases of Venus and the lumpiness, or irregularity, of the surface of the moon. Thus we see how the myths of modernism snowball along!

But the science of Galileo's day was Aristotelian in approach and he knew that some of his conclusions

would not fit in with their approach. He published his conclusions in 1613 in *Letters on Sunspots*. The Church largely accepted his science but the universities which were steeped in Aristotle opposed him. Many writers have claimed that Galileo feared being branded as a heretic and therefore being handed over to the Inquisition - J.W. Draper is typical of such writers, but the truth is that it was the scornful rejection of his fellow astronomers which he greatly feared. Indeed, he dedicated his book to Pope Paul III. His book circulated for over 70 years with no opposition from the Church, but with almost continual opposition from his fellow scientists!!

Far from being excommunicated and ostracized by the Church at this stage in his life, he became popular with several cardinals and was befriended by the man who later became Pope Urban VIII.

But much later (in 1632) Galileo wrote another book which he called, *Dialogue Concerning the Chief World Systems* and in this book he went much further and did alienate the Church. In this book he sought to reinterpret several biblical passages but this went against the Council of Trent guidelines which were established by about 1565. The Roman Catholic Church of the day did not feel it was the business of a scientist (and one rejected by many of his fellow scientists at that), to publish works on biblical interpretation, this being considered as interference in the matters of the Church. To make things even worse he mocked some ideas of the pope (Urban VIII, who had been his friend) in this book. Before a year had elapsed from its publication, Galileo's book was banned.

Now quite elderly, he was brought to Rome but his penalty was nowhere near as harsh as some have claimed. He was detained but given his own quarters and his own servant. He later returned home. True, he could not travel freely but was still allowed visitors and also free to write to whoever he chose. A.N. Whitehead wrote this:

'Galileo suffered an honourable detention and a mild reproof, before dying peacefully in his own bed.'

(A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, 1946).

So the usual story about the brilliant genius Galileo fighting against a scientifically-prejudiced, small-minded and superstitious Church which culminated in him being handed over to the Inquisition and finally rotting in a prison cell has almost no association with the truth. Most of his opposition came from fellow scientists who accepted Aristotelian cosmology. He only got into trouble with the Church when, later in life, he went a step too far and sought to re-interpret Scripture in a manner which the Council of Trent had recently barred.

Now, let it be clear that, in all of this, I am not necessarily defending the Roman Catholic Church of Galileo's time, but we should be clear about the facts of this because the usual modernist myth of a hapless Galileo upsetting the Church by his assertion that the earth was not at the centre of the universe is really wide of the mark. The Church had little interest in his science but generally welcomed his conclusions – it was his fellow scientists in the universities who opposed him. Indeed, many reading the relevant evidence may feel that Galileo brought persecution on himself by showing a lack of wisdom in his later years.

By the way, there is also another thing we should clarify here and now:

It was the Aristotle that Galileo's fellow scientists greatly revered who had taught that, in the universe, everything revolves around the earth – the Bible says no such thing! Psalm 19:4-6 has been misunderstood in this regard. While these verses could suggest that the sun itself moves, it is clear that

this is only a reference to the sun moving across the heavens as it appears to us on earth. It is true that the Council of Trent supported Aristotelian science but only because it seemed the best understanding available at that time. As R.J. Blackwell has pointed out, Galileo was condemned not because the Bible conflicted with observation, but because he differed with the Church over what authority should be used to interpret it (Blackwell, 1991, 120ff – see sources).

Robin A. Brace, 2005.

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