

The New Galileo & the Truth about Copernicanism

Galileo was wrong?! How could modern men from the twenty-first century dare to name a book with such a title? No doubt, almost every book written about cosmology in modern times begins with the premise that Copernicus' and Galileo's cosmology was correct and the Catholic Church that condemned them was very mistaken. Typical remarks in a book about Galileo begin with very stern and foreboding words. The reader is simply not permitted to entertain any other possibility as to the construction and movements of the cosmos. As one author put it: "Galileo...who produced *the irrefutable proofs of the Sun-centered system*...came into direct and disastrous conflict with the Church."²⁹ Another says: "Readers, who know quite well that the Earth goes around the sun..."³⁰ Yet another says:

Who better than Galileo to propound the most stunning reversal in perception ever to have jarred intelligent thought: We are not the center of the universe. The immobility of our world is an illusion. We spin. We speed through space. We circle the Sun. We live on a wandering star.³¹

The reader, not knowing any differently, doesn't give the author's assertion a second thought for all his life he has been taught that the Earth revolves around the sun, and he has placed himself under the edict that this particular teaching of modern science is no more to be doubted than the fact that fish swim or that birds fly.

As the typical author begins from the unquestioned premise that Galileo's sun-centered world has been indisputably proven, he will postulate various reasons why the Catholic Church did not accept this new and improved model of the universe. The suggestions are many and varied, ranging from "ecclesiastical bureaucracy," "deliberate chicanery," "religious fundamentalism," "corporate interests" to "unfair tactics,"³² but there is little doubt that virtually all the biographers and historians will invariably dismiss the possibility that Galileo could have been wrong.



Galileo Galilei: 1564 – 1642

Galileo's Conversion to Geocentrism

Although it will certainly come as a shock to most people, one very important reason we argue against heliocentrism is that we are revealing the wishes of none other than Galileo himself. Every modern reader, and even most historians, is the fact that just one year prior to his death Galileo made it very clear to his former allies where he now stood on the subject of cosmology. On the 29th of March 1641, Galileo responded to a letter that he received from his colleague Francesco Rinuccini, dated the 23rd of March 1641, containing discoveries made by the astronomer Giovanni Pieroni concerning the parallax motion of certain stars, from which both Rinuccini and Pieroni believed they had uncovered

proof of the heliocentric system. Rinuccini writes to Galileo:

Your Illustrious Excellency, Signor Giovanni Pieroni has written to me in recent months telling how he had clearly observed with an optical instrument the movement of a few minutes or seconds in the fixed stars, but with just that level of certainty that the human eye can attain in observing a degree. All this afforded me the greatest pleasure - witnessing such a conclusive argument for the validity of the Copernican system! However, I have felt no little confusion because of something I read a few days ago in a bookshop. I happened to look at a book that is just now on the verge of being published. According to the author, if it were true that the sun is the center of the universe, and that the Earth travels around it once every year, it would follow that we would never be able to see half of the whole sky by night, because the line passing through the center and the horizons of the Earth, touching the periphery of the great orb, is a cord of a piece of the arc of the circle of the starry heavens, the diameter of which passes through the center of the sun. And since I have always believed it to be true - not having personally witnessed it - that the first [star] of Libra rises at the same moment as the first [star] of Aries sets, my limited intelligence has been unable to arrive at a solution. I therefore implore you, in your very great kindness, to remove this doubt from my mind. I will be very greatly obliged to you. Reverently kissing your hand, etc. Francesco Rinuccini.”³⁴

Galileo, not being particularly moved by the assertions, writes this surprising response to Rinuccini:

The falsity of the Copernican system should not in any way be called into question, above all, not by Catholics, since we have the unshakeable authority of the Sacred Scripture, interpreted by the most erudite theologians, whose consensus gives us certainty regarding the stability of the Earth, situated in the center, and the motion of the sun around the Earth. The conjectures employed by Copernicus and his followers in maintaining the contrary thesis are all sufficiently rebutted by that most solid argument deriving from the omnipotence of God. He is able to bring about in different ways, indeed, in an infinite number of ways, things that, according to our opinion and observation, appear to happen in one particular way. We should not seek to shorten the hand of God and boldly insist on something beyond the limits of our competence....
D'Arcetri, March 29, 1641. I am writing the enclosed letter to Rev. Fr. Fulgenzio, from whom I have heard no news lately. I entrust it to Your Excellency to kindly make sure he receives it.”³⁵

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Io Galileo Galilei" followed by a stylized flourish. The signature is enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Search as one might, few today will find Galileo's retraction of Copernicanism cited in books or articles written on the subject of his life and work. Fewer still are those in public conversation about Galileo who have ever heard that he recanted his earlier view. The reason is, quite simply, that the letter has been obscured from the public's eye for the last four centuries. As Galileo historian Klaus Fischer has admitted: "The ruling historiographers of science cannot be freed from the reproach that they have read Galileo's writings too selectively."³⁶ Fortunately, Galileo's retraction managed to escape censorship and find its way among the rest of his letters in the twenty-volume compendium *Le Opere di Galileo Galilei* finally published in 1909 with a reprint in Florence in 1968. Centuries prior to its publication, there was a concerted effort by either Rinuccini or someone behind the scenes to cover up the fact that

the letter was, indeed, written and sent by Galileo. We know this to be the case since a rather obvious attempt was made to erase Galileo's name as the signatory of the letter. The compiler of the original letter makes this startling notation: "The signature 'Galileo Galilei' has been very deliberately and repeatedly rubbed over, with the manifest intention of rendering it illegible."³⁷ Stillman Drake, one of the top Galileo historians, noticed the subterfuge:

Among all Galileo's surviving letters, it is only this one on which his name at the end was scratched out heavily in ink. I presume that Rinuccini valued and preserved Galileo's letters no matter what they said, but did not want others to see this declaration by Galileo that the Copernican system was false, lest he be thought a hypocrite. ³⁸

Judging from the contents of his letter to Rinuccini, for quite some time it seems that Galileo had been contemplating the problems inherent in the Copernican system, as well as his desire to convert back to an Earth-centered cosmology. The wording in his letter is rather settled and direct as it does not reflect someone who is confused or equivocating. It holds the convictions of a man who has been swept off his feet by a more convincing position. Hence, far from being a hero of modern cosmology, shortly before his death Galileo had become its worst adversary – a fact of history that has been either quietly ignored or deliberately suppressed.

What has also been suppressed is the spiritual reason Galileo had a change of heart. In the new book *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*, author David Wootton makes a substantial case that prior to 1639, three years before his death, Galileo was not a true Christian but merely a nominal Catholic who was a member of a secret society that actually rejected major Catholic doctrines. These doctrinal aberrations, coupled with his immoral life, strongly suggest that Galileo's quest to advance Copernicanism was motivated by a very strong anti-Church sentiment, as was the case with many other scientists in history. By 1641, it seems to be the case that Galileo's newfound faith led him to accept fully the Church's historic geocentric cosmology as a divine revelation. ³⁹

²⁹ Ivan R. King, *The Unfolding Universe*, 1976, p. 132, emphasis added. Ivan King was professor of astronomy at the University of California, Berkeley.

³⁰ Giorgio de Santillana, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *The Crime of Galileo*, 1962, editor's preface, pp. viii-ix. De Santillana's major thesis is stated very early in the book: "...the tragedy was the result of a plot of which the hierarchies themselves turned out to be the victims no less than Galileo – an intrigue engineered by a group of obscure and disparate characters in strange collusion who planted false documents in the file, who later misinformed the Pope and then presented to him a misleading account of the trial for decision" (p. xx). Suffice it to say, our book will show that it is Santillana who has been the victim of an intrigue engineered by a group of prominent and influential scientists in collusion, who made false conclusions from scientific experiments and then presented a misleading account to the public.

³¹ Dava Sobel, *Galileo's Daughter*, 1999, p. 153.

³² These are some of the various reasons given for the Church's rejection of Galileo's theory in the opening pages of Giorgio Santillana's *The Crime of Galileo* (pp. ix, xv, xx), a very terse and satirically worded account of the Galileo affair which is highly critical of the Catholic Church's role and very favorable to Galileo.

³³ Galileo Galilei was also Latinized to Galileus Galileus, which was often the way Galileo signed his name, as for example in his exchange of letters with Kelper in 1597. He was also called Galileo Galilei Linceo.

³⁴ *Le Opere Di Galileo Galilei*, Antonio Favaro, reprinted from the 1890-1909 edition by Firenze, G. Barbèra – Editore, 1968, vol. 18, p. 311, translated from the original Italian by Fr. Brian Harrison.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 316, translated from the original Italian by Fr. Brian Harrison. A note added by the editor states: "Bibl. Naz. Fir. Banco Rari, Armadio 9, Cartella 5, 33. – Originale, di mano di Vincenzio Viviani." This means that the letter is stored in the rare archives of the National Library at Florence in the rare books department, in cabinet #9, folder #5, 33 and written in the original hand of Vincenzio Viviani, since Galileo was blind in both eyes in 1641. Viviani was Galileo's last pupil and first biographer. NB: Viviani had performed the first Foucault-type pendulum experiment in 1661. Galileo's letter to Rinuccini was translated into English by Fr. Brian Harrison upon request. Stillman Drake contains a similar translation in *Galileo At Work: His Scientific Biography*, 1978, p. 417.

³⁶ Klaus Fischer, *Galileo Galilei*, Munich, Germany, Beck, 1983, p. 114.

³⁷ Original Italian: “La firma ‘Galileo Galilei’ è stata accuratissimamente coperta di fregi, con manifesta intenzione di renderla illeggibile” (*Le Opere Di Galileo Galilei*, vol. 18, p. 316, footnote #2). Translated by Fr. Brian Harrison.

³⁸ Stillman Drake, *Galileo At Work: His Scientific Biography*, 1978, p. 418.

³⁹ See Volume III, Chapter 16 for the details of Galileo’s conversion. David Wootton, *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*, New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 2010.

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