

Some Thoughts on Galileo and the So-Called Conflict of Science and Religion

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.

There has arisen much misunderstanding of the science vs. religion issue. This misunderstanding often surfaces in the midst of creation/evolution debates. In order to poison the wells against any attempt on the part of the creationist to defend his position, the detractor will appeal to the testimony of history to prove his point that religion has consistently stood against the progress of science. Invariably this appeal to history will rehearse the story of Galileo. But is it true that the controversy surrounding Galileo proves that religion has been an impediment to the progress of science? No, it does not.

It is a misreading of the history to maintain that there was the black/white conflict between science and religion in Western thought the way some people think. In his book *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts Between Science & the Bible* Charles E. Hummel sets forth an analysis of the issues surrounding Galileo. {1} It is important to note, contrary to the popular misconception, that the aspect of society that had the biggest problem with Galileo was not religion but science; or more specifically, the Aristotelian philosophical paradigm that had arrested the science of Galileo's day. Of the five major public controversies in which Galileo was involved, only one was with the Church. The other four were with the academics and scientists of his day.

The first controversy was with Cesare Cremonini, the ranking professor of philosophy at Puda over the issue of changes in the heavens (which the Aristotelian Cremonini denied). The second was with Giovanni Magini, who had previously been the chair of mathematics at Padua and who was the first academic to draw the clergy into these scientific controversies, over Galileo's discovery of four of Jupiter's moons (which contradicted Aristotle) which Galileo discussed in his publication *The Starry Messenger*. The third controversy was with Ludovico delle Colombe, who was a professor at Pisa and who had spearheaded a resistance to the new discoveries, over Galileo's work *Discourse on Floating Bodies*. (Eventually it became a concerted effort of this organized movement against Galileo to make these controversies a religious issue.) The fourth public controversy was with Father Christopher Scheiner, a Jesuit astronomer at the University of Ingolstadt in Bavaria, over the issue of whether the observed dark spots on the Sun were sunspots or were orbiting planets. Taking them as sunspots entailed that there were imperfections on the Sun, a decidedly anti-Aristotelian notion. With this fourth controversy came Galileo's first public embracing of the Copernican system. The fifth and final controversy involved a Dominican friar Father Tommaso Caccini who had preached against Galileo. His preaching, together with Galileo's responses and the involvement of other figures in the matter, set into motion a series of events that lead to the condemnation of the Copernican system in 1616 and eventually to the infamous condemnation of Galileo himself in 1633.

While it is the case that the distinctions between religion, government, science, and many other facets of the society of Galileo's day are not easily made, {2} and are surely not as clear cut as my summary of Hummel's characterization here might suggest,

it nevertheless remains that it is wrong to claim that religion as such, or Christianity in particular, was the impediment to science that some think. If we learn anything from history, it is that a given philosophy and the hold it may have over the science of any given generation is more likely to expedite or hamper good science. Darwinists of today would do well to heed this lesson from history.

{1} Charles E. Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts Between Science & the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), pp. 87-96.

{2} For example, it surely was the case that so many of the university professors were Aristotelian largely because Aristotle by this time had become the Christian orthodoxy of the day. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that the elements that contributed to the "scientific retardation" were a product of Aristotelian philosophy, not Christian theology.