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The Case of Galileo: A Closed Question?

Annibale Fantoli (*translated by George V. Coyne, S.J.*)
Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012
271 pages, \$28.00

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The commission preparing *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), wanted to promote a more open and constructive dialogue between religion and the sciences. An initial draft decried the Church's condemnation of Galileo and expressed the hope that this type of response not be repeated. This explicit reference to Galileo was removed, but the approved draft referenced a recently published book about his life and works. In 1941, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences had commissioned this biography to effectively demonstrate "that the Church did not persecute Galileo" (p. 229). Once he completed the manuscript, the biography's author, Pio Paschini, was repeatedly denied permission to publish by Church authorities until his death in 1962. The biography was published in 1964, but its conclusions were substantively revised by an unnamed editor to soften criticism of Church authorities, and then used as a footnote to *Gaudium et Spes* to affirm the Church's interest in free scientific inquiry. Even in their attempts to address the legacy of the Church's treatment of Galileo, Church officials appear unable to admit a mistake.

This vignette encapsulates the message of Fantoli's latest contribution to the "Galileo Affair." The Church has struggled—and still struggles—to come to terms with how it mistreated Galileo. Fantoli has published extensively on this topic over many years. This book synthesizes recent scholarship about Galileo and makes it available to a nonspecialist audience. He presents the Galileo Affair and its aftermath in a form that will serve any Catholic educator interested in the science/religion interface. Most of the book is dedicated to carefully presenting and analysing the historical evidence about Galileo's intellectual journey and how he, despite intentions to the contrary, entered into sustained conflict with ecclesial authorities, resulting in his trial, coerced confession, and condemnation. A strength of Fantoli's work is its critical analysis of important—at times contradictory—evidence about

the contemporary deliberations among Church leadership from archival sources, some of which have only recently been made available. Fantoli was a participant in the commission initiated by Pope John Paul II to investigate the Copernican and Galilean question, and the book concludes with a critical analysis of that attempt to foster a more honest and respectful dialogue between Catholicism and science.

Fantoli presents the individual views of and social interactions among the principal participants in the Galileo Affair, yet also explains this drama as a conflict between scientific paradigms. Galileo personally observed astronomical evidence that contradicted the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian cosmology. The book presents Galileo as one of the most important scientists of his era, yet also a faithful Catholic who sought to work within the constraints of his faith. Galileo presented his observations, but then was forced to defend his reputation as it was attacked. Fantoli conveys the degree to which this affair was shot through with Vatican palace intrigue and conflict between Church and secular rulers.

Neither Galileo nor scientific colleagues had sufficient evidence to completely establish the Copernican worldview. Rather, the drama of the Galileo Affair unfolded during a transition period between paradigms—or, more precisely, as Galileo emerged as a leading spokesman for a new paradigm in the context of an institution unwilling to consider alternatives to the dominant worldview. Galileo's scientific work was attacked by Church authorities on scriptural, cosmological, and theological grounds. In 1636, he was tried, found guilty, officially silenced, and placed under house arrest for the balance of his life.

This book is remarkable for its careful use of evidence and evenhanded interpretation of events. The result is a work of interest to any reader who wishes to understand Galileo in his social and scientific context, as well as the problems that follow when religious authorities cling to a specific scientific paradigm. At times, Fantoli verges on sympathetic toward the religious authorities who persecuted Galileo, demonstrating how the Church's magisterium had so completely committed itself to the Aristotelian scientific model that its leaders could not consider the possibility of other paradigms. Church leaders were fully dedicated to this ideological worldview, and would not consider the possibility of evidence contradicting it—much less of people of faith evaluating evidence and drawing conclusions at variance with Church views. Thus, Fantoli deftly presents a narrative of dissent based on science and the conflicts between an emerging, evidence-based worldview

and religious ideology. He also demonstrates the more intractable problem of religious teachings tied to understandings of nature as a scientific knowledge system evolves, in some cases, dramatically.

The subtitle of this book—“a closed question?”—is quite appropriate, for the concluding chapter offers its most significant contribution. Chapter 7 (“The Burdensome Inheritance of the Galileo Affair”) narrates the history of Church authorities struggling to rectify this case. Certainly critics of Catholicism have used the Galileo Affair to relentlessly attack the Church, and religious authority more generally. Fantoli does not concern himself with that subject, but rather with subsequent fumbling efforts by Church authorities to redress the wrongs committed against Galileo and to reframe its approach to science. Fantoli is sympathetic to these efforts, but frank in his assessment of the inability of Church leadership to admit the affair was both a mistake and an injustice. Church authorities repeatedly have tied themselves into pretzels trying to place the affair in the past without confessing the errors of their predecessors.

Were that this were a closed historical matter; but Fantoli demonstrates that it most assuredly is not. Pope John Paul II initiated a commission to study this affair in 1979; the commission completed its work in 1992. The report of this commission sought to “close” the Galileo Affair by placing the blame for Galileo’s mistreatment in the hands of “theologians” and “judges,” when in fact, it was the official organs of the Church and Pope Urban VIII who condemned him. Fantoli implies that the commission appeared more concerned with preserving the reputation of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (a consulter for the Holy Office) than of Galileo. Fantoli’s presentation suggests that Pope John Paul II was sincere in his desire to redress this affair (as was the commission). However, Cardinal Poupard, charged with coordinating the final report, deployed subtle shifts in language and presentation, thus distorting the work of the commission. With its explanatory phrase “tragic mutual incomprehension,” the report seemed to allocate responsibility equally between Galileo and the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The result is an attempt to preserve the decorum of Church authority rather than to confess to its historical mistakes. This maneuver should disturb any educator committed to free inquiry, whether into the natural world or human history.

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