



# Science vs. Religion

»»»—Written by A Mighty Arrow—>>>  
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In the middle ages, sailors feared voyaging out too far toward the edge of the earth lest they would fall over and plunge into the depths of space. A popular pastime of scholars and theologians in medieval theological schools was to debate exactly how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Monks who studied the human body before the age of modern science believed that men had one more rib than women because of the Genesis story.

These are examples of what we may call “scholarly myths,” stories about the past that purport to be true but are just made up. They most likely began merely as jocular rumors that were passed around in European universities; but now they are pseudo-historical “facts” that have spread all over the world and have become the proud sources of proof for anti-religious persons of the inherent backwardness of the religious mind.

This essay is not, however, about these scholarly myths; suffice it to say that they are all thoroughly false. Most scholars had already known from the time of Aristotle (322 B.C.) that the world was a sphere; and no serious religious scholar could graduate from a medieval theological school believing that angels danced on pinheads. These are all merely ridiculous stories that have been passed down through

the years mainly for the purpose of proving that Europe during the middle ages was quite stupid. And since the continent of Europe at that time was for the most part Christianized, the implication is obvious.

But we would like to deal here with a much more general idea about European history that has become prevalent in our day. It is perhaps one of the most false and one of the most unhistorical myths that has been forced onto our minds. I have searched through scores of books to find some substantial evidence of this myth, but I only met with a sizable body of evidence to its contrary.

The myth is the old story that Science and Religion grew up in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as enemies. Again, it is the synthetic notion that when the two peculiar sets of people called scientists and theologians first met, they found each other’s company unbearable and decided to go their separate ways. A warm acquaintance of mine expressed it most succinctly when he one day announced in my

hearing that (in words I do not exactly remember), “Hundreds of years ago, scientists began making lots of discoveries, and then religious people rose up and tried to kill them.” I do not hold it against him; he is the product of a nationwide educational system that ventures to teach kids history





without requiring them to read history books. Our aim for the present is to quickly show the fallacy of this myth by presenting the correct historical facts.

The best example of the historical myth that usually comes to mind is the case of Galileo. I myself was taught that he was the epitome of scientific advancement, the bright and glimmering star who took the helm of the sixteenth century scientific revolution. (Which is all true.) But then all of the sudden, we are told, the Church decided to unleash its holy fury upon the humble scientist merely because he said that the earth went around the sun instead of the reverse. But the brave scientist held his ground and resisted religion with all his might until finally, almost miraculously, his theory was vindicated. And so religion proved from that point on to be anti-Science, anti-Progress, anti-Intellect, anti-Whatever. I gather that is also the idea most people have.

Then it happened one day that I started reading an actual book on Galileo; and I was stunned to find that much of what I was told up to that point was wrong. For example, the “Church” as a whole happened to support Galileo’s writings; and the Catholic Pope Paul V himself enjoyed having the scientist at his dinner parties and listening to him expound his theories over dessert. Who actually prescribed Galileo’s sentence was a small group of eleven Aristotelian clergymen who were indignant at his theories because he contradicted Aristotle’s teaching of an earth-centered universe. It turned out to be a hypocritical religious subcommittee that harassed the scientific genius—no where near in fact the whole “Church.”

More importantly, something that some modern scientists like to disregard as a mere glitch in Galileo’s personality was that he was an overtly spiritual and

God-fearing man. He constantly dreaded the drawing of battle lines between science and religion; and he took pleasure in probing the relationship of *discovered* truth in Nature to *revealed* truth in the Holy Bible. These are his words:

“Holy Scripture cannot err and the decrees therein contained are absolutely true and inviolable. I should only [add]...that, though Scripture cannot err, its expounders and interpreters are liable to err in many ways.”

In the midst of a disease-ridden and turbulent life, he once wrote to his daughter these words: “Whatever the course of our lives, we should receive them as the highest gift from the hand of God....Indeed, we should accept misfortune not only in thanks, but in infinite gratitude to Providence, which by such means detaches us from an excessive love for Earthly things and elevates our minds to the celestial and divine.”

Galileo Galilei thus lived and died a faithful Catholic. He is called the “Father of modern astronomy.”

But Galileo was not the only Christian scientist to spark the scientific revolution: it turns out that the vast majority of science figures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were sincerely Christian. About a third of them even studied theology before entering upon a science career. Let us mention two more.

The next interesting figure of the scientific revolution was a man by the name of Andreas Vesalius. His major contribution to the revolution was that he was the first to attempt dissecting actual human bodies on a large scale to study the human body. He wrote his *Fabric of the Human Body*, in which he included some strikingly accurate sketches of the body systems.



The Church particularly liked the *Fabric*, because in it he credited God for all the wonders found in the body, like the bones:

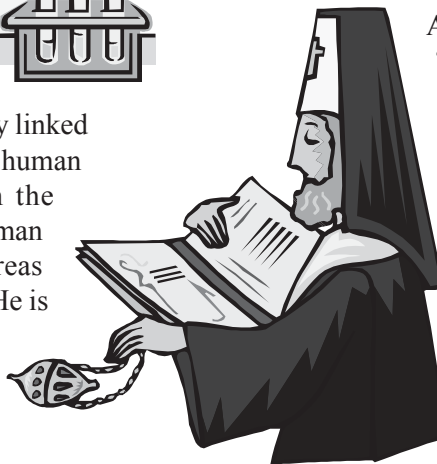
“God, the supreme Architect, in his wisdom formed material of this temperament, placing it beneath the surface as a foundation for the whole body.”



“He that made our Souls, and upholds them, can best know what they are, and how long he will have them last.”

In his scientific works, Boyle wanted his readers not to “barely observe the Wisdom of God,” but to be emotionally convinced of it. He called himself a “priest serving in nature’s temple,” and he personally paid for the translation of the Bible into the Gaelic and Indian tongues. Robert Boyle lived and died a faithful Anglican. He is called the “Father of modern chemistry.”

For Vesalius, human anatomy was essentially linked to the soul. He used to set his sketches of the human body against a stretch of countryside in the background, to remind the viewer that the human body is an instrument for the soul. Andreas Vesalius lived and died a faithful Catholic. He is called the “Father of modern anatomy.”



After reading of about ten to twenty examples of real Christian scientists like the three men above, I was convinced that I simply had to discard the scholarly myth forever. There is a lot that can be said about the current doctrine (held by most of our science professors) that science

The last remarkable figure of the revolution that we will mention—although there are very many—is Robert Boyle. Anyone taking a modern chemistry course will learn his indispensable gas law ( $P_i V_i = P_f V_f$ ) and that he was the inventor of the barometer and conducted several groundbreaking experiments on the nature of the atmosphere. What one will not find out from a chemistry course, however, is that Boyle was a deeply religious man who wrote almost as much about God as he did about the nature of air. Here is a sample of his convictions:

“I am not a Christian because it is the religion of my country and my friends. When I choose to travel in the beaten road, it is not because I find it is the road, but because I judge it is the way.”

and religion “contradict” each other, but this essay will be limited to the historical aspect of it. If you would like to read up on the subject, you can pick up a copy of *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter Between Christianity and Science* (Lindberg & Numbers), or *Galileo’s Daughter* (Sobel), or any honestly-written history book on early modern Europe. I would like finally to suggest that we all be very wary when we hear modern history talk about Christianity, whether it be a history lecture given in college or a history rumor being passed to us by our next-door neighbor.✚