One of the characteristics of the day is the renewal of that collision between men of science and believers in Revelation, and of that uneasiness in the public mind as to its results, which are found in the history of the 17th century. Then Galileo raised the jealousy of Catholics in Italy; and now in England the religious portion of the community, Catholic or not, is startled at the discoveries or speculations of geologists, natural historians [i.e. biologists] and linguists. Of course I am speaking, as regards both dates, of the educated classes, of those whose minds have been sufficiently opened to understand the nature of proof, who have a right to ask questions and to weigh the answers given to them. It was of such, we must reasonably suppose, that Father Commissary [of the Holy Office] was tender in 1637, and to such he allied in his conversation with Galileo, as he took him in his carriage to the Holy Office. “As we went along,” says Galileo, “he put many questions to me, and showed an earnestness that I should repair the scandal, which I had given to the whole of Italy, by maintaining the opinion of the motion of the earth; and for all the solid and mathematical reasons which I presented to him, he did but reply to me: ‘Terra autem in aeternum stabit,’ because ‘Terra autem in aeternum stat,’ as Scripture says.” [‘The earth will eternally stand still’ because ‘the earth stands still eternally,’ as Scripture says.]

There could not be a greater shock to religious minds of that day than Galileo’s doctrine, whether they at once rejected it as contrary to the faith, or listened to the arguments by which he enforced it. The feeling was strong enough to effect Galileo’s compulsory recantation, though a Pope was then on the throne who was personally friendly to him. Two Sacred Congregations represented the popular voice and passed decrees against the philosopher, which were in force down to the years 1822 and 1837 [when Galileo was taken off the Index.]

Such an alarm never can occur again, for the very reason that it has occurred once. At least, for myself, I can say that, had I been brought up in the belief of the immobility of the earth as though a dogma of Revelation, and had associated it in my mind with the incomunicable dignity of man among created things, with the destinies of the human race, with the locality of purgatory and hell, and other Christian doctrines, and then for the first time had heard Galileo’s thesis, and, moreover, the prospect held out to me that perhaps there were myriads of globes like our own all filled with rational creatures as worthy of the Creator’s regard as we are, I should have been at once indignant at its presumption and frightened at its speciousness, as I never can be at any parallel novelties in other human sciences bearing on religion; no, not though I found probable reasons for thinking the first chapters of Genesis were not of an economical character, that there was a pre-Adamite race of rational animals, or that we are now 20,000 years from Noe. For that past controversy and its issue have taught me beyond all mistake, that men of the greatest theological knowledge may firmly believe that scientific conclusions are contrary to the Word of God, when they are not so, and pronounce that to be heresy which is truth. It has taught me, that Scripture is not inspired to convey mere secular knowledge, whether about the heaven or the earth, or the race of man; and that I need not fear for Revelation whatever truths may be brought to light by means of observation and experience out of the world of phenomena which environ us.
And I seem to myself here to be speaking under the protection and sanction of the Sacred Congregation of the Index itself, which has since the time of Galileo prescribed to itself a line of action, indication of its fearlessness of any results which may happen to religion from physical sciences. Many books have since that time been placed upon its prohibited catalogue, the worlds of (humanly speaking) distinguished men, the works of Morkof, Puffendorf, Brucker, Ranke, Hallam, Macauley and Mill; but I find no one of physical celebrity, unless such writers as Dr. Erasmus, Darwin, Bonucci, Klee and Burdach are so to be accounted. One great lesson surely, if no other, is taught by the history of theological controversy since the 16th century: moderation to the assailant, equanimity to the assailed, and that as regards geological and ethnological conclusions as well as astronomical.

But there is more than this to give us confidence in this matter. Consider then the case before us: Galileo on his knees abjured the heresy that the earth moved; but the course of human thought, of observation, investigation and induction, could not be stayed; it went on and had its way. It penetrated and ran through the Catholic world as well as through the nations external to it. And then at length, in our own day, the doctrine, which was the subject of it, was found to be so harmless in a religious point of view, that the books advocating it were taken off the Index, and the prohibition to print and publish the like was withdrawn.

But of course the investigation has gone further, and done, or is now even doing, some positive service to the cause which it was accused of opposing. It is in the way to restore to the earth that prerogative and pre-eminence in the creation which it was thought to compromise. Thus investigation, which Catholics would have suppressed as dangerous, when, in spite of them, it has had its course, results in conclusions favorable to their cause. How little then need we fear the free exercise of reason! How injurious is the suspicion entertained of it by religious men! How true it is that nature and revelation are nothing but two separate communications from the same infinite Truth!

Nor is this all. Much has been said of late years of the dangerous tendency of geological speculations or researches. Well, what harm have they done to the Christian cause, others must say who are more qualified than I am to determine; but on one point, that is the point before us [of whether other planets are inhabited by rational beings], I observe it is acting on the side of Christian belief. In answer to the supposed improbability of their being planets with rational inhabitants, considering that our globe has such, geology teaches us that, in fact, whatever our religion may accidentally teach us to hope or fear about other worlds, in this world at least, long ages past, we had either no inhabitants at all, or none but those rude and vast brutal forms, which could perform no intelligent homage and service to their Creator. Thus one order of spiritual researches bears upon another, and that in the interest or service of Christianity; and supposing, as some persons seem to believe in their hearts, that these researches are all in the hands of the enemy of God, we have the observable phenomenon of Satan casting out Satan and restoring the balance of physical arguments in favor of Revelation.

Now let us suppose that the influences which were in the ascendant throughout Italy in 1637 had succeeded in repressing any free investigation on the question of the motion of the earth. The mind of the educated class would have not the less felt that it was a question, and would have been haunted, and would have been poisoned, by the misgiving that there was some real danger to Revelation in the investigation; for otherwise the ecclesiastical authorities would not have forbidden it. There would have been in the Catholic community a mass of irritated, ill-tempered, feverish and festering suspicion, engendering general skepticism and hatred of the priesthood, and relieving itself in a sort of tacit freemasonry, of which secret societies are the development, and then in sudden outbreaks perhaps of violence and blasphemy. Protestantism is a dismal evil; but in this respect Providence has overruled it for...
the good. It has, by allowing free inquiry in science, destroyed a bugbear, and thereby saved Catholics themselves so far from the misery of hollow profession and secret infidelity.

I think, then, I must say distinctly that I have no sympathy at all in that policy, which will not look difficulties or apparent difficulties in the face, and puts off the evil day of considering them as long as it can. It is the way of politicians who live from hand to mouth, only careful that the existing state of things should last their time. If I find that scientific inquiries are running counter against certain theological opinions, it is not expedient to refuse to examine whether these opinions are well founded, merely because those inquiries have not yet reached their issue or attained a triumphant success.

The history of Galileo is the proof of it. Are we not at a disadvantage as regards that history? And why? Why, except because our theologians, instead of cautiously examining what Scripture, that is, the Written Word of God, really said, thought it better to put down with a high hand the astronomical views which were opposed to its popular interpretation? The contrary course was pursued in our own day; but what is not against the faith now, was not against the faith three centuries ago; yet Galileo was forced to pronounce his opinions a heresy. It might not indeed have been prudent to have done in 1637 what was done in 1822; but, though in the former date it might have been unjustifiable to allow the free publication of his treatises with the sanction of the Church, that does not show that it was justifiable to pronounce that they were against the faith and to enforce the abjuration.

I am not certain that I might not go further and advocate the full liberty to teach the motion of the earth, as a philosophical truth, not only now, but even three centuries ago. The Father Commissary said, it was a scandal to the whole of Italy; that is, I suppose, an offence, a shock, a perplexity. This might be, but there was a class, whose claims to consideration are too little regarded now, and were passed over then. I mean the educated class; to them the prohibition would be a real scandal in the true meaning of the word, an occasion of their falling.

Men who have sharpened their intellects by exercise and study anticipate the conclusions of the many by some centuries. If the tone of public opinion in 1822 called for a withdrawal of the prohibition at Trent of the earth’s movement, the condition of the able and educated called for it in Galileo’s age; and it is as clear to me that their spiritual state ought to be consulted for, as it is difficult to say why in fact it is so often is not. They are tenderly to be regarded for their own sake; they are to be respected and conciliated for the sake of their influence upon other classes. I cannot help feeling that, in high circles, the Church is sometimes looked upon as made up of the hierarchy and the poor, and that the educated portion, men and women, are viewed as a difficulty, an incumbrance, as the seat and source of heresy, as almost aliens to the Catholic body, whom it would be a great gain, if possible, to annihilate.

For all these reasons, I cannot agree with those who would have us stand by what is probably or possibly erroneous, as if it were dogma, till it is acknowledged on all hands, by the force of demonstrations to be actually such. If she [the Catholic Church] affirms, as I do not think she will affirm, that everything was made and finished in a moment though Scripture seems to say otherwise, and though science seems to prove otherwise, I affirm it too, and with an inward and sincere assent. And, as her word is to be believed, so her command is to be obeyed. I am as willing then to be silenced on doctrinal matters which are not of faith as to be taught in matters which are. It would be nothing else than a great gain to be rid of the anxiety which haunts a person circumstanced as I am, lest, by keeping silence on points as that on which I have begun to speak, I should perchance be hiding my talent in a napkin. I should welcome the authority which by its decision allowed me to turn my mind to subjects more congenial to it. On the other hand, it is legitimate authority alone which I have any warrant to recognize; as to the ipse dixit of individual divines, I have long essayed to divest myself of what spiritual writers call “human respect.”
am indeed too old to be frightened and my past has set loose my future.


[Thinkers of the Modern Age](https://inters.org/Thinkers-of-the-Modern-Age) [2]

**Source URL (modified on 2013-03-12 12:36):** https://inters.org/Newman-Galileo-Revelation

**Links**
[1] https://inters.org/newman