Did Galileo Recant Heliocentrism a Year Before His Death?

A Debate: Nickel v. Sungenis

James Nickel: In the 700 page book Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right (2010), published by CAI (Catholics Apologetics International), the authors Robert Sungenis and Robert Bennett quote words from Galileo that “seem” to indicate that before he died, he denounced the Copernican system as false.

The quote is from a letter written by Galileo to Francesco Rinuccini, 29 March 1641. It is from a reliable source; i.e., Stillman Drake, *Galileo At Work: His Scientific Biography*, (Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 417. Here it is:

“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 ....”

According to the reasoning of Sungenis, since Galileo had a “death-bed” conversion, then Geocentrism, as a cosmology, is true. That is, Galileo’s confession is another nail in the coffin of Copernicanism (RIP). Remember the buzz in the 1990s that Charles Darwin purportedly recanted of his theory of evolution before he died? Scholarship has shown that this “report” was just a story (invented by Lady Hope in 1915). To me, it was interesting to see how Christians jumped on this and used it as “evidence” to prove evolution wrong. Their reasoning? If the author of a theory recants of that theory on his death bed, the theory must be wrong. This is the reasoning of Sungenis; he is using this Galileo “confession” to justify his belief that Geocentrism is true and, by consequence, Heliocentrism is false.
R. Sungenis: No, never made a connection between Galileo’s recantation and the truth of geocentrism. As my book states, I mention Galileo’s recantation for the sole purpose of showing that Galileo is not the icon of modern cosmology.

James Nickel: What Sungenis is doing is a classic example of forcing a quote to support a thesis without considering the context. Many authors do this and I’m sure I have been guilty of the same. This is easy to do if you have an “axe to grind.” Since Sungenis believes the truth of Geocentrism, he will “go looking” for support of his belief anywhere and this “Galileo find” is to him a “magic trumpcard.”

R. Sungenis: No, never considered it a “trumpcard,” and I have no “axe to grind.” I simply educated the public to the fact that Galileo recanted his heliocentric views.

James Nickel: What questions should one ask of this quote?

1. When was it written? 1641.

2. From #1, how old was Galileo when it was written? 76 years of age (he died at age 77). He was blind by 1638 so he was not able to read the document. Good questions for follow up are:

   “Did he really write it or did someone else?”

   “If he did write it, he had to dictate it. Did he do the dictation?”

   “Was the dictation accurate or was it rewritten with a specific motive in mind?”

3. What is the context of these words?

   The ramifications of Question 2 are very important if they can be answered. Let’s assume Galileo truly dictated these words and focus on Question 3, the context, for Sungenis ignores it.

R. Sungenis: Actually, we will find that James Nickel is the one ignoring the context. See below.

James Nickel: The Latin source is Commercio epistolare di Galileo Galilei, Volume 2 (p. 361) and Google Books has it online. The English translation above follows the Latin. To find the context, all one has to do is look above to note that this letter has a subtitle. Here it is in Latin:

   “Scherzosamente da principio, quindi con altissimo ragionamento risolve una dubitazione insorta nell’animo del Rinuccini contro il Sistema Copernicano : e cio’ in risposta alla precedente del 23 Marzo.”
Translated into English: “Jokingly at first, than with high reasoning resolves a doubt of Rinuccini about the Copernican system, as an answer of previous letter of March 23.”

This puts another spin on the matter, doesn’t it? It would be reasonable to conclude that this is the same literary device used in the “Dialogo” (i.e., Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems: Ptolemaic and Copernican, 1632); that is:

Grant, as a context for one’s argument, what the other side says is true. Then, pick it to pieces.

R. Sungenis: The only “spin” here is Mr. Nickel’s. First of all, contrary to Mr. Nickel’s claim, neither the above “subtitle” nor the letter of Galileo to Rinuccini is written in Latin. They are written in Italian. Here is a picture of the page from Commercio epistolare di Galileo Galilei, Vol. 2, p. 361:

Second, the sentence at the head of the letter beginning with “Scherzosamente da principio…” is not, contrary to Mr. Nickel’s claim, a “subtitle.” It is an introductory note written by the editor, namely, Eugenio Albèri (1809-1878), who published the book in Firenze: Societa editrice fiorentina, 1859, which you can find at http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006085175.

In other words, the statement, “Jokingly at first, than with high reasoning resolves a doubt of Rinuccini about the Copernican system, as an answer
of previous letter of March 23,” is not Galileo’s but the editor’s biased remark. Obviously, just like Rinuccini who erased Galileo’s signature off this letter, Eugenio Alberi doesn’t like the fact that Galileo is recanting heliocentrism, and thus he tries to make it appear as if Galileo is only “joking” or is not serious about what he is saying in the letter.

We will also find that Mr. Alberi makes a few other biased remarks in his footnotes. For example, here are the footnotes at the bottom of page 361.

Footnote #2 says in English: “We said that this was a witty way to refute those who contradict the Copernican System, because each sees what it means to produce the authority of the Theologians by means of an astronomical argument when especially Galileo, in his famous letter to Madame Cristina, had demonstrated with much acumen how the Fathers never intended to make pronouncements on this subject in the Scriptures. It is further noted that this is indeed the language that Galileo uses continuously when he pretends to want to impugn the Copernican opinions in the Dialogue of the Great Systems.”

Obviously, Footnote #2 is nothing but the slighted opinion of the editor, Eugenio Alberi, who wants to keep Galileo a Copernican. And yet Mr. Nickel will tell us below that further on down in Galileo’s letter Galileo rejects both the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems. So which is it, Mr. Nickel? As for Kepler and Newton, their systems only worked slightly better than Copernicus’, and that is because they used non-uniform orbits of the planets, just as Ptolemy did with his equant, and which could have been applied to Brahe’s geocentric system. All the systems are a wash and don’t prove anything about which system is correct.

Incidentally, a better translation than Mr. Nickel’s of the editor’s note is: “Jokingly at first, then with very astute reasoning, he resolves a doubt
which arose in the conscience of Rinuccini against the Copernican System; this was in response to the preceding [communication] of March 23.”

The point in fact is, this letter of Galileo’s to Rinuccini is no joke. If it was, why did Rinuccini erase Galileo’s signature from the letter? Obviously, Rinuccini didn’t think it was a joke at all, and he wanted to make sure no one else saw Galileo’s recantation. Likewise, when Stillman Drake quoted from Galileo’s letter, he didn’t think it was a joke, since he makes no mention of such a motivation. The only joke here is the one being played on us by Mr. Nickel and Mr. Alberi.

James Nickel: Later this letter says “E come che io stimo insufficienti le osservazioni e conietture Copernicane, altrettanto reputo piu’ fallaci ed erronee quelle di Tolomeo, di Aristotele e de’loro seguaci.” In English, “As I consider insufficient the observation and conjectures of Copernicus as well I maintain more wrong those by Tolomeus, Aristotle and their followers.” Hence, Copernicus is “insufficient,” as at the time, in effect, it was (Kepler and Newton polished and refined it). But Tolomeus, et. al., are, according to Galileo, wrong.

R. Sungenis: So, when Mr. Nickel wants to glean something from Galileo’s letter that seems to support Mr. Nickel’s arguments, he has no problem quoting from the letter and taking it very seriously, and not as a joke.

James Nickel: Lesson learned? Be careful how quotes are used and interpreted (i.e., context, context, context!). In the case of Sungenis, he ignores the page from which he pulled the quote (or, did he merely quote a secondary source, i.e., Drake, and not go to the source himself?). If he did go to the source, his omission is telling, telling on him. Hence, what else is he fudging? Can we truly trust anything else he is saying? I’ll leave the answer to this question to the discerning reader.

R. Sungenis: I hope Mr. Nickel becomes as “discerning” as he wants his readers to be. As we have seen, it is Mr. Nickel who doesn’t understand the context. He can’t even distinguish Latin from Italian, much less an editor’s opinion from the actual letter Galileo wrote. Consequently, it is Mr. Nickel who has ignored the “context.”

Let’s look at this from another angle. If it’s context that Mr. Nickel wants, let’s add some more context to why Galileo recanted his position one year before he died. The likely reason is that Galileo, according to the new book by James Wooten, shows that Galileo had a conversion to the real Christian faith in 1639, just two years before he wrote his recantation in 1641.
For those interested, here is an excerpt from the 8th edition of our book, *Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right*:

**Galileo’s Conversion to the True Catholic Faith**

The question arises whether it was merely a scientific conviction that led Galileo to change his mind toward geocentrism or was something more serious and personal involved. We get a strong indication of the latter from the research of David Wootton in the 2010 book, *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*. Similar to the biography we have assembled in our book, Wootton is not shy about painting the darker side of Galileo’s life. For example, after remarking on how badly Galileo treated two of the three children he fathered with Marina Gamba, Wootton gives substantial evidence that Galileo fathered a fourth child out of wedlock around 1610. Her name was Anna, given by her mother Cassandra, although nothing further about the latter is forthcoming. Benedetto (which is also the same name of Galileo’s best friend, Benedetto Castelli) was the son of Anna and who “was, it seems, the spitting image (‘il vero ritratto’)” of Galileo.¹ Wootton also tells us about the affair between Galileo and Alessandra Buonamici who was married to a bed-ridden husband and wished to leave him for Galileo but which circumstances did not allow.² Wootton also reveals how Galileo blatantly plagiarized the work of Scheiner regarding the movement of sunspots, which Galileo then used to argue that the Tychonic geocentric system required the sun to change its angle of orientation, something not required of the Copernican heliocentric system.³ This data on sunspots was quickly added to the *Dialogo*, almost word-for-word from Scheiner’s manuscript.

As Wootton adds up all the sordid details of Galileo’s life, he comes to the conclusion that Galileo was not a true Catholic at all. In a chapter titled “Galileo’s (un)belief,” Wootton pulls no punches in saying that “If agreeing with the fundamental teachings of the Church is what counts, then neither Galileo nor Mme de Warens was a Catholic at all….These three types of evidence establish, I think, a very strong presumption that Galileo was not a Christian, nevertheless they are not conclusive,”⁴ and then, “In later work, Redondi has made clear that he shares the general consensus that Galileo was a believing Christian, if not an orthodox one. This consensus, in my view, is simply mistaken.”⁵ Wootton then reveals the likely motivation for Redondi’s sentiment:

¹ *Galileo: Watcher of the Skies*, p. 185, with Wootton’s reference taken from Favaro’s *Scampoli galileiani*, ii, 460-5.
In the case of Galileo, where generations of scholars, particularly liberal Catholic scholars, have wanted to portray him as an innocent victim, whose genuine faith ought to have been a protection against any condemnation for heresy, there is now an enormous cultural investment in the idea of him as a good Catholic. Vivani was remarkably successful in establishing an account of Galileo’s commitment to Catholicism which has survived largely unchallenged for more than three centuries.6

Elaborating on this theme, Wootton writes:

Urban VIII regarded the argument of the Dialogue as not only disloyal but impious. Here, as elsewhere, his judgment was sound. Galileo always acknowledged the authority of the Church, and always claimed to be a pious Catholic. But a distinction needs to be drawn between his official position and his private convictions. In the twenty volumes of his works there is a very striking absence of evidence suggesting any private piety. Reading his letters, there is no sign—or almost no sign—of his saying his prayers, listening to sermons, or reading either the Scriptures or the fathers of the Church. There is no indication that he believed in sin, contrition and redemption. He avoids all mention of Jesus. Galileo was no Christian: we can see well enough behind the public persona to be fairly sure of this, and we have the confirmatory testimony of Castelli.

Portraying Galileo more like a medieval Carl Sagan, Wootton adds:

Galileo’s Copernicanism, his scientific method and his unbelief were, indeed, mutually supporting: all three represented a rejection of the traditional view that the world was made for man, and that man was made in the image of God. Rather, Galileo argued, we need to recognize that the world is profoundly imperfect, that we can understand only fragments of it, and that humankind appears irrelevant to its purposes, supposing it has any. Galileo sought to live with the idea that we do not know what the universe if for, even though certain aspects of it suggest that it was designed for a purpose.7

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6 Ibid., p. 241.
7 Ibid., pp. 264-265.
Galileo sought to escape from a world in which his mother loomed too large by discovering the insignificance of humankind: far from being at the center of a universe built especially for them, human beings were insignificant creatures within the vast expanses of an inhuman cosmos.\(^8\)

Indeed he offered a view of the cosmos in which humankind, and the things that matter to humankind—love and hatred, virtue and vice, mortality and immortality, salvation and damnation—were irrelevant. Far from embodying a scheme of values, far from embodying a \textit{telos} or purpose, Galileo’s universe appeared to be indifferent to moral and metaphysical issues, and even indifferent to our own existence. It is not hard to sympathize with those who recoiled from this new vision.\(^9\)

Above all, there is no evidence prior to 1639 that Galileo believed that Christ died to save our souls from damnation.\(^10\)

As we will see with many scientists who lead a life of sin (e.g., Albert Einstein), they attempt by means of science to eliminate God from the picture. Often they are driven by a subconscious need to relieve their guilt. Pretending God doesn’t exist is one such way to do so. Wootton then says:

…Galileo’s central but unspoken claim was that if one had a proper idea of nature then one could dispense with the Christian idea of an omnipotent, providential God who had created the universe and would judge the souls of men and replace it, on the one hand, with a Platonic idea of God as the Supreme Mathematician, indifferent to the affairs of men, and on the other hand, with nature as the \textit{anima mundi}.\(^11\)

…Galileo’s view of movement is compatible with the idea of an eternal universe, and that if the universe is eternal, one can dismiss all arguments from the first cause or the first mover, get rid of God and become an atheist.\(^12\)

\(^8\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 253.
\(^9\) \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 257-258.
\(^10\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 249.
\(^11\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 247. Wootton adds: “The letter to Dini is the only occasion in his correspondence in which Galileo gives expression to his esoteric religious teaching, and of course it comes with an urgent request: ‘I beg you not to let it come into the hands of any person who would use the hard and sharp tooth of a beast…and so would completely mangel and tear it to pieces.’”
\(^12\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 248.
Wootton concludes:

My account of Galileo in this book has been novel in three significant respects: I have emphasized his early Copernicanism, his reluctant empiricism and his private irreligion. I have also stressed his extraordinary intellectual ambition, his enormous vanity and his capacity for self-destruction: Galileo was no secular saint, although he was capable of pretending that he was.13

But that was then, and this is now. As Wootton makes a strong case that Galileo was as unchristian as Koestler said, he also reveals a stunning reversal in Galileo’s life – that he became a true Catholic around 1639, three years before his death. This event, of course, would explain why Galileo told Rinuccini in 1641 that he no longer accepted the Copernican system and now believed that God could easily make the universe with the Earth motionless in the center. It was on June 7, 1639 that…

Benedetto Castelli, Galileo’s old friend, former pupil and long-time intellectual companion, wrote to him from Rome. They had known each other for at least thirty years. They were so close that in 1620 Cavalieri had assumed that anything written to one of them would be known by the other. Each had reason to trust the other completely. And in questions concerning the religion of Galileo we can trust Castelli…14

Castelli has heard news of Galileo that has made him weep with joy, for he has heard that Galileo has given his soul to Christ. Castelli immediately refers to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard….he turns to the crucifixion, and in particular to the two thieves crucified on either side of Christ.

Castelli’s invocation of the parable…and two thieves…is clear and unambiguous. He believes Galileo is coming to Christianity at the last moment, but not too late to save his soul. There is no conceivable interpretation of this letter which is compatible with the generally held view that Galileo was, throughout his career, a believing Catholic. It will not do, for example, to suggest that Galileo had previously been a believer, but had been lax in the practice of his religion.

13 Ibid., p. 265.
14 Ibid., p. 247.
Castelli allows himself to discuss Galileo’s unbelief only because he has been given to understand that he is now, at long last, a believer. There are no further letters like this one….Castelli’s letter cannot tell us what really happened to Galileo in May 1639; but what is clear is what Castelli had always understood about his close friend: that he was no believer. And if anyone was in a position to know if Galileo was or was not a believer it was Castelli.15

As Wootton noted earlier that, “liberal Catholic scholars have wanted to portray him [Galileo] as an innocent victim” and have an “enormous investment in the idea of him as a good Catholic,” and “accept without question the claims made on behalf of modern science,” one of Wootton’s final comments is apropos: “Rethinking Galileo’s (un)belief is an important step towards re-examining current orthodoxies regarding the intellectual and cultural origins of the scientific revolution.”16 Since the time of Copernicus, modern scientists have been on a quest to eliminate God from the cosmos and turn it into a self-existent and self-perpetuating machine. The main reason, as we have seen, is to rid themselves of the guilt of their sin.

In the end, although we are grateful to Wootton for taking a stand against the rosey picture of Galileo foisted on the public for the last three centuries, his book does not contain the account of Galileo’s stated rejection of Copernicanism in 1641, which seems odd considering Wootton is the first to reveal Galileo’s conversion to true Catholicism. We don’t know the reason for Wootton’s omission here, but it may have something to do with the fact that he still believes stellar parallax was when “the movement of the earth was first reliably demonstrated,” and that the Foucault Pendulum “allows one directly to see the earth moving.”17

Robert Sungenis

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15 Ibid., pp. 247-248.
16 Ibid., p. 250.
17 Ibid., p. 262.