

Galileo's letter to Christina of Lorraine (1615)
(extracts)

[...] Since the Holy Ghost did not intend to teach us whether heaven moves or stands still, whether its shape is spherical or like a discus or extended in a plane, nor whether the earth is located at its center or off to one side, then so much the less was it intended to settle for us any other conclusion of the same kind. And the motion or rest of the earth and the sun is so closely linked with the things just named, that without a determination of the one, neither side can be taken in the other matters. Now if the Holy Spirit has purposely neglected to teach us propositions of this sort as irrelevant to the highest goal (that is, to our salvation), how can anyone affirm that it is obligatory to take sides on them, and that one belief is required by faith, while the other side is erroneous? Can an opinion be heretical and yet have no concern with the salvation of souls? Can the Holy Ghost be asserted not to have intended teaching us something that does concern our salvation? I would say here something that was heard from an ecclesiastic of the most eminent degree: "That the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes."

But let us again consider the degree to which necessary demonstrations and sense experiences ought to be respected in physical conclusions, and the authority they have enjoyed at the hands of holy and learned theologians. From among a hundred attestations I have selected the following: "We must also take heed, in handling the doctrine of Moses, that we altogether avoid saying positively and confidently anything which contradicts manifest experiences and the reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences. For since every truth is in agreement with all other truth, the truth of Holy Writ cannot be contrary to the solid reasons and experiences of human knowledge." [Benito Pereyra S.J., *Commentaria et disputationes in Genesim*, Lyon 1599] And in St. Augustine we read: "If anyone shall set the authority of Holy Writ against clear and manifest reason, he who does this knows not what he has undertaken; for he opposes to the truth not the meaning of the Bible, which is beyond his comprehension, but rather his own interpretation; not what is in the Bible, but what he has found in himself and imagines to be there." [Augustine, *Epistola septima ad Marcellinum*] [...]

Let Your Highness note further how circumspectly this saint [Augustine] proceeds before affirming any interpretation of Scripture to be certain and secure from all disturbing difficulties. Not content that some given sense of the Bible agrees with some demonstration, [...] The following words which he adds should alone be sufficient to repress or moderate the excessive license which some men arrogate to themselves: "It often falls out that a Christian may not fully understand some point about the earth, the sky, or the other elements of this world—the motion, rotation, magnitude, and distances of the stars; the known vagaries of the sun and moon; the circuits of the years and epochs; the nature of animals, fruits, stones, and other things

of that sort, and hence may not expound it rightly or make it clear by experiences. Now it is too absurd, yea, most pernicious and to be avoided at all costs, for an infidel to find a Christian so stupid as to argue these matters as if they were Christian doctrine; he will scarce be able to contain his laughter at seeing error written in the skies, as the proverb says. The worst of the matter is not that a person in error should be laughed at, but that our authors should be thought by outsiders to hold the same opinions, and should be censured and rejected as ignorant, to the great prejudice of those whose salvation we are seeking. For when infidels refute any Christian on a matter which they themselves thoroughly understand, they thereby evince their slight esteem for our Bible. And why should the Bible be believed concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the Kingdom of Heaven, when it is considered to be erroneously written as to points which admit of direct demonstration or unquestionable reasoning?"

Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo, edited by Stillman Drake (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1957), pp. 173-216. Original Italian text published in *Opere di Galileo Galilei*, Edizione Nazionale edited by Antonio Favaro (Firenze: Giunti-Barbera, 1968), vol. V, pp. 309-348. Translation by Stillman Drake accessible @ <http://inters.org/Galilei-Madame-Christina-Lorraine>