

No, The Catholic Church Didn't Punish Galileo for Heliocentrism

If you're going to pose as being objective, it's always good to have your facts straight.

Scientific American, clearly stung by criticism that the [March for Science](#) (which it had helped promote) had been politicized, published a defense of politicized science [in an editorial this week](#).

The argument of the author—Ubadah Sabbagh—is that science *can't help but be political*. The editorial makes a distinction between the scientific enterprise, which is political by virtue of the society it serves, and science proper, which it goes on to extol as being objective, rational, and unbiased.

But just as it is sounding so pious and impartial, the editorial lapses into historical myth and bad history. In its discussion of societal control over the scientific enterprise, it uses the Galileo incident as an example:

"The Vatican famously imprisoned Galileo and forced him to recant his scientific assertions that the Earth revolves around the Sun to avoid being burned at the stake."

Say what?

This is [a popular historical canard](#) that has everything going for it except objectivity, rationality, and impartiality.

First of all, Galileo was never "imprisoned." He was, for a time, [confined to a villa in Florence](#) for violating [an agreement he had made with the Pope](#). Let me repeat that: a *villa in Florence*. What do I have to do get a sentence like

that?

Secondly, he was never asked to “recant his scientific assertions that the Earth revolves around the Sun.” The Church had already accepted the feasibility of Copernicus’ heliocentric cosmology. Not only was the pope who was sideways with Galileo a Copernicus fan, but most of the Catholic scientists at the time were already Copernicans.

The issue was not whether it was acceptable to assert that the earth revolved around the sun. The issue was the assertion (which Copernicus never made but Galileo did) that there was sufficient scientific evidence to prove it, which, at the time, there wasn’t. Such evidence would come later, but at the time there were problems that the primitive state of science could not resolve, such as the fact that the stars did not appear to wobble as they should have given the contemporary belief that they were much closer than they in fact were.

And when Cardinal Bellarmine challenged Galileo to produce the proof for the heliocentric view, he produced his theory of tides to do it, which turned out to be completely wrong. The pope at the time overreacted to Galileo (whom many historians admit brought a lot of what happened on himself), but the Church was correct.

The Church was trying to preserve scientific integrity against a scientist whom even the scholarly critics now admit didn’t have his evidential ducks in a row.

The Church [has since apologized](#) for its overzealousness in dealing with Galileo, but its critics—the ones with the sanctimonious pretensions to objectivity—continue to purvey fake history.

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