Affair be terminated as a myth of the Church’s opposition to science. However, in the mind of the (almost unanimous) community of scholars, it failed in that mission and left further work for the Church to pursue. While, for instance, the authors admit that “It is surprising … that not a single Galileo scholar was appointed to the Commission”, they excuse this by saying that the “four sections [of the Commission] did not have the means to enlist historians who could devote themselves full time to the Galileo Affair”. In fact, at least one section of the Commission did enlist the service of Galileian scholars but their work was largely ignored in favour of the opinion of one Church historian, not a Galileian scholar, whose position neatly fit a priori John Paul II’s wish in constituting the Commission: that it “study the Galileo case more deeply and, in loyal recognition of wrongs from whatever side they came”, in order to dispel mistrust between the Church and science. And so in the address of Cardinal Pouard closing the Commission’s work some wrong is placed on the “bad guys” and some on the “good guys”. Galileo is accused of having betrayed the very scientific method of which he was a pioneer by not accepting that Copernicanism at that time was a mere hypothesis. On the other side, some Church theologians are accused of not knowing how to interpret Scripture, with the exception of Cardinal Bellarmine who, paradoxically, was (in the sense of the above desire to partition the blame), a better scientist than Galileo. All of this is thoroughly contested by Galileo scholars. Finally, the authors attempt to excuse the inadequacies of the closure address of Cardinal Pouard by claiming that it “cannot be considered a summary of conclusions that never existed”. A poor apology, indeed, for an incomplete job, a job which had been requested in all seriousness by the then reigning Pope and one that will, at least among the community of Galileo scholars, continue to haunt the Church.

Vatican Observatory

George V. Coyne

SOURCES FOR ASTRONOMY/SCRIPTURE

Le Conflit entre l’Astronomie Nouvelle et l’Écriture Sainte aux XVIe et XVIIe Siècles.

Pierre-Noël Mayaud has given us a monumental reference work, well over 3000 pages in six volumes (bound in five books). Subtitled “A moment in the history of ideas around the Galileo Affair”, it encompasses a vast survey of the intersection of astronomy and the Holy Scriptures, from the Church Fathers to roughly the time of Newton. Not only are 425 authors listed in vol. i, but the relevant passages are presented in French translation in the ensuing volumes. Nearly 80 pages in the first volume are dedicated to thumbnail biographies of the hundreds of authors represented here. This is, in fact, a good place to start if you wish to see whether or where someone is represented.

The cited works are divided into two dossiers, A and B. The first (in vol. ii)
includes the Church Fathers (from Lactantius to Augustine) and 70 commentaries on Job (or notes on Job in editions of the Bible). The much larger Dossier B (in vol. iii) features extracts from a veritable Who’s Who of 16th- and 17th-century astronomers — sometimes with mere snippets or statements saying their work has nothing of relevance, or, as in the case of Galileo, the whole of his letter to the Grand Duchess Christina.

Vol. iv contains notes for the two dossiers — in some cases quite extensive. For Campanella there are 17 pages, for Foscarini 14, and for Galileo 16. Vol. v contains a Scripture index. If you want to know who has cited Joshua asking the sun to stand still, you will find over a hundred references in the Dossiers A and B.

So, how to find the forest among all these trees? The key is in the final summary volume, which systematically discusses the citations, generally in historical order. Prior to 1500 each Biblical verse was seen as “the word of God” with no attempt to view the words in the culture of their epoch. There was nothing of the later idea (especially well formulated by Kepler) that the Scriptures had been specifically framed for the common parlance of the day. (No surprise here!) In the sixteenth century after Copernicus, “in the absence of a definitive proof of heliocentrism, the anthropocentric geocentrism of the Bible, despite the quasi eclipse of the veritable Biblical cosmology, seemed unavoidable, allowing us to understand why the great majority of the Copernicans themselves continued to confront the Scriptures”.

Only at the very end of the summary volume, with a section on the interventions by the Church, does Mayaud’s deep Catholic apologetic stance become clear. Here he argues similarly to Cardinal Poupart in his 1992 statement on the Galileo affair. The “absence of a definitive proof” (i.e., an annual stellar parallax) serves in effect as a protective umbrella for those holding to a conservative Scriptural interpretation in the seventeenth century. What is missing in this approach was not that Galileo didn’t properly understand the philosophy of science, but that he was effectively changing science from a discipline propelled by proofs to a system that relies on the persuasive coherency of interconnections.

Mayaud’s bias reveals itself in another way, as when he states that (the Protestant) John Calvin “briefly but violently stigmatized the Copernican thesis in his Commentary on the first Epistle to the Corinthians”. It is surprisingly difficult to find this text in these massive six volumes, but it is buried in a note (in vol. iv) to Calvin’s commentary on Job (in vol. ii) and cited in quite another footnote not under the above quotation (in vol. vi). The note in question does not indicate that after a long search involving many scholars, the passing reference by Calvin was finally located in 1971 by Richard Stauffer, and that it has meanwhile been cogently argued that since Calvin did not mention Copernicus by name nor cite any particular Scripture against heliocentrism, the passage probably referred to another matter entirely.

In the totality of this massive achievement, these are minor criticisms. Mayaud has produced what is now the essential starting point for anyone wishing to explore this intriguing topic further.

Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics

OWEN GINGERICH