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Burned Alive: Giordano Bruno, Galileo and the Inquisition

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Martínez. Alberto A.

Burned Alive: Giordano Bruno, Galileo and the Inquisition.

London: Reaktion Books, 2018. Pp. 348 + 21 ill. ISBN 978-1-78023-896-8 (hardcover) US\$40.

The heresy trials of Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei are the subject of a long-lasting and contradictory debate. Both were partisans of heliocentrism, a development in Renaissance astronomy associated with the rise of modernity and the beginnings of the scientific revolution. The objective of Alberto Martínez's book is to demonstrate, on the basis of primary research, that the persecution of the two scholars by the Roman Inquisition shared a common denominator: their adherence to the Pythagorean philosophical and spiritual tradition, or at least to some of its key precepts. These included the idea of an infinite and eternal universe, consisting of solar systems centred on a star and composed of inhabitable planets and moons. All components of the universe(s) were animated and guided by souls that were fragments of the one universal soul (God) and transmigrated from one physical body to another. Martínez argues that both Bruno and Galileo were not necessarily persecuted and condemned for the pioneering dimension of their thoughts but for their advocacy of old ideas that dated back to Greek antiquity, remained in circulation for over two millennia, were subject to censure by the Catholic medieval mainstream, and revived by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanism. He points to the progressive decline in intellectual tolerance in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which ensnared not only Bruno and Galileo but a number of others in sympathy with the "Pythagorean" ideas.

Burned Alive is organized into five components: an introduction and four long chapters divided into substantive thematic sections. The "Introduction" is of fundamental importance in rehabilitating the place of Giordano Bruno among his fellow proponents of heliocentrism: Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Martínez points out that Bruno's "account of the universe [proved] far more correct than the beliefs of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo" (8–9) in the matter of the motion of celestial bodies, centre-less infinite universe, countless solar systems, and planets capable of supporting life. Martínez argues that Bruno's enduring obscurity is the consequence of the ferocity with which the Inquisition sought to destroy his memory and annihilate his works.

Martínez's first and most extensive chapter, "The Crimes of Giordano Bruno" (14–99), reconstructs the case against Bruno and places it in a comparative context. While from the modern point of view the most significant charge against Bruno and Galileo was their support of heliocentrism, Martínez demonstrates that the notion of the Earth circling the Sun was only one of the ideas associated with "Pythagorean" doctrine, rejected by Aristotle and repeatedly denounced by Christian authorities. While the Venetian and Roman Inquisition brought a much broader range of accusations against Bruno, the majority of them had to do with conventional blasphemies and offences against church doctrine. Martínez shows that Bruno abjured the conventional doctrinal offences but was unwilling to reject his fundamental philosophical precepts, in particular the idea of the infinite universe in motion. The reasons for his execution, other than his refusal to recant his philosophical conclusions, were not made public and the records of his trial were kept secret for a long time, while the destruction of his works and memory was assiduously pursued. Chapter 1 persuasively and concisely demonstrates that "Bruno died for affirming that there exist many worlds, souls migrate into bodies, the soul of the world is the Holy Spirit and so forth" (97), ideas that the church had held heretical since its beginnings.

The remaining three chapters (chapter 2, "Aliens on the Moon?"; chapter 3, "The Enemies of Galileo"; and chapter 4, "Worlds on the Moon and the Stars") track the growing animosity of the church authorities to the "Pythagorean" ideas in the first decades of the seventeenth century, as reflected in the works of Melchior Inchofer and Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, the "hammer of the heretics." Despite the hostility and ridicule hurled against the Pythagorean ideas, they attracted scholars who were often unaware of the dangers. Among those who published or expressed ideas similar to Bruno's were Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, and Tomasso Campanella, Galileo's staunch defender and long-term prisoner of the Inquisition. Martínez demonstrates that it was Galileo's pro-Pythagorean position that gave rise to criticism, suspicions, and eventually the charges of heresy against him. Ironically, it was Galileo's *Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems of the World: Ptolemaic and Copernican* (1630, published 1632), meant as a compromise, that triggered his trial by the Roman Inquisition. Martínez stresses that to a degree Galileo was a victim of circumstance: namely, the growing pressure from the Habsburgs that compelled the papacy to intensify the persecution of "heretical" scholars. He demonstrates

persuasively the similarity of the charges brought up against both Bruno and Galileo and the fact that some of the key prosecutors had been involved in both trials. The conclusion to chapter 4 returns to the issue of Pythagoras and his intellectual legacy as a key factor in the persecution of Bruno and Galileo by the Inquisition. Ironically, as Martínez suggests, the attempt to suppress that legacy led to the modern transformation of Pythagoras from “an eccentric mystic and pagan cult leader” to “a pioneering scientist” (278).

Burned Alive is a book that all academic libraries should have. It represents a fascinating, well-written, and accessible contribution to the study of Bruno and Galileo, and a valuable contextualization of heliocentrism in the broader long-term intellectual continuities of the idea. It also offers a valuable contribution to the history of the post-Tridentine Renaissance, especially the heterogenous and mutable positions of various church figures and the often ambiguous and malleable attitudes of the Roman Inquisition. Last but certainly not least, it represents a very useful historical case study in favour of the freedom of thought. While it may not satisfy the specialists in theology, history of science, or philosophy, it represents an excellent piece of historical reconstruction that should prove very valuable in research and teaching.

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Otterspeer, Willem.

In Praise of Ambiguity: Erasmus, Huizinga and the Seriousness of Play.

Traduit du néerlandais par Vivien Collingwood. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2018. 89 p. ISBN 978-9-0872-8310-0 (broché) US\$19.50.

Publié d’abord en néerlandais en 2015 sous le titre de *Lof der dubbelzinnigheid : Erasmus, Huizinga en de ernst van het spel* et traduit plus récemment par Vivien Collingwood, le livre de Willem Otterspeer s’ouvre sur une étude du concept fondamental d’ambiguïté dans l’*Éloge de la folie* d’Érasme. Si, chez le penseur de Rotterdam, le refus de prendre parti qui caractérise son regard sur le monde a pu paraître manquer de courage aux yeux de ses nombreux lecteurs, Otterspeer y voit plutôt les indices d’une approche relativiste qui accompagne l’ensemble de la philosophie occidentale. *L’Éloge de la folie* doit donc être lu comme une