

**Report of August Meeting
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch**

Speaker: Dr Peter Slezak
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Topic: *Re-Trying Galileo*
Philosophy, Science & Religion

On 25 August 1609, Galileo demonstrated his first telescope to Venetian lawmakers. Almost 400 years later to the day, Galileo was again the centre of attention, when Dr Peter Slezak addressed an audience of 64 at the August meeting of the Southern Highlands Branch in his lecture entitled *Re-Trying Galileo*.

Galileo was an Italian physicist, mathematician, astronomer and philosopher, whose achievements were legendary. He has been called the “father of modern physics”, the “father of modern observational astronomy” and the “father of science”. Stephen Hawking says of him, “Galileo, perhaps more than any other single person, was responsible for the birth of modern science.”

Controversy dogged Galileo when he championed Copernicanism at a time when numerous philosophers and astronomers held firmly to the geocentric view. When Galileo began supporting heliocentrism openly, the opposition to his views became extremely bitter. Eventually in 1633, he was tried by the Inquisition, found “vehemently suspect of heresy”, forced to recant, and then spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

Peter Slezak discussed at length the nature of heresy as defined in Galileo’s time, and then placed the Inquisition’s finding of “vehemently suspect of heresy” in context. Heresy was seen at that time as the worst crime conceivable, a crime against God which signified the death of the soul. The heretic was viewed as having committed spiritual suicide. It followed that should such a heretic induce others to embrace his opinions, then he would also become guilty of spiritual homicide.

Being found guilty of “vehemently suspect of heresy” was not the worst finding the Inquisition could have made. More serious still would have been the finding of “formal heresy”. Galileo was charged with “suspected heresy” of which there were three categories: Strong, Vehement and Slight. Lesser charges would have included, among

others, erroneous beliefs, scandalous beliefs, temerarious beliefs, dangerous beliefs, necromancy, evil spells, witchcraft and black magic.

Peter Slezak quoted the views of Stillman Drake, "...I think that if Galileo's case symbolizes anything, it symbolizes the inherent conflict between authority and freedom rather than any ineradicable hostility of religion towards science. It was an accident of Galileo's time that authority happened to be vested in a particular religious institution and that his field of independent thought happened to be the creation of modern science."

At the conclusion of this well attended lecture, many philosophical questions were asked by the audience. The vote of thanks was given by Anne Wood.

Anne Wood