

Copernicus & the Church: Part I

Lead: Often requiring discipline, compassion, and self-denial, religion can be a powerful force for good, but religious institutions can also be short-sighted, conservative, willing to throw themselves across the path of progress.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Nikolaj Kopernik (ko 'per neek) was born on February 19, 1473 in Thorn ('tor un), Poland. He was raised by his maternal uncle following the death of Nicolaj's

wealthy father. His uncle convinced the young student to attend the University of Krakow. Caught by the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, with a name now latinized to Nicolas Copernicus, he continued a continental education, excelling in medicine, law and the liberal arts. While not abandoning his church calling, he actively practiced medicine, studied economics, and surrendered to a life-long fascination with astronomy.

At the time, it was believed the earth was the center of the universe with the sun, planets, and stars revolving around it. This was due in large part to acceptance of the scientific studies of the ancient

scholars such as Aristotle and the 2nd century Alexandrian mathematician Claudius Ptolomeus. Further, this geocentric interpretation had a theological application. The Roman Catholic, indeed the universal Christian, view of the universe asserted heaven was up and hell was down. Any other idea was thought to call into question the teachings of the Bible and by extension the authority of the Church.

Copernicus disagreed. He believed that the sun was the center of the solar system, yet because of his devotion to the faith, Copernicus refused to publicly announce his findings. Instead, he secretly wrote a manuscript *Commentariolus* in May

of 1514. Copernicus kept his secret for nearly twelve years. He was terrified that the Church would discover his beliefs and prosecute him. Only close friends and family knew of his heliocentric theory...that is until a supporter decided to publish his own findings. Next time: Copernicus is forced to go public.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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- Prosch, Harry.** *The Genesis of Twentieth Century Philosophy: The Evolution of thought from Copernicus to the Present.* London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1956.
- Rousseau, Richard.** *Irreligious Dialogue: Facing the Next Frontier.* Montrose, PA: Ridge Row Press, 1981.