



## Late Feyerabend on materialism, mysticism, and religion



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### ABSTRACT

Feyerabend's interests in religion and mysticism grew through his career. In his later writings, Feyerabend's numerous critiques of scientific materialism are often accompanied by purported advantages of religious orientations and temperaments. These recommendations do not simply follow from his tolerant theoretical pluralism; they are more positive attempts to articulate distinctive aspects of human life satisfied by religion, but not by scientific materialism. Elevating the human need for mystery, reverence, and love, he contrasts these goods with the deliverances of monistic conceptions of science and reason. I bring attention to some of the common themes in these remarks to argue that they were integral with other parts of his philosophical project and that they could serve as helpful rejoinders to contemporary exhortations to science-based secularism from philosophers of science.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper aims to elucidate a few threads of Paul Feyerabend's writing on religion and mysticism, and to suggest that his attitude toward the topics was generally more positive than what results from a mere tolerance for heterodox ideas or a consequence of his theoretical pluralism. Feyerabend understood religion as practice and as temperament, emphasizing especially themes of the world's ineluctable mysteriousness. These passages do not form any systematic doctrine endorsing religion but do cohere with other parts of Feyerabend's philosophical project such as his commitment to the ineffability of nature. While some readers might find his references to gods and scripture as a bizarre curiosity of his later work, I will suggest that such themes are of a piece with his larger philosophical goals and moreover that the ideas on the nature of religion are live ones that remain relevant in contemporary debates over science and religion.

I begin (§2) with some background and context to Feyerabend's thinking, showing how his concern with characterizing science led naturally to debates about science's relationship with religion. For Feyerabend this process included a time-honored tradition of using the Galileo affair as a lens through which to focus his own concerns about science and its cultural authority. Feyerabend followed others in this sort of analysis, including the playwright Berthold Brecht, whose interpretations of the Galileo affair had earlier been produced on stage as *The Life of Galileo*. I then review Feyerabend's late writing on religion and mysticism (§3) and illustrate the filiations with other parts of his philosophy, namely his ideas about the ineffability of nature and the existential context of knowledge. Finally, I show how Feyerabend's thoughts could be relevant to contemporary debates on science and religion advanced by other philosophers of science, especially to the extent that he analyzes religions as worldviews, as distinct from causal theories in competition with other scientific theories (§4).

### 2. Setting the stage with Galileo

In a 1990 lecture entitled, 'The Crisis of Faith in Science', Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger argued that contrary to the image of science as a benign institution forever pointing the path of progress, science has in fact been used in very destructive ways; and furthermore that

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there is no one monolithic worldview arising from the natural sciences, and certainly not one that forces the abdication of traditional and religious ways of life. In light of changing sociological and philosophical insights, he said, we needed fresh interpretations of the relationships between science and society, and re-examinations of how science bears on religion. These are familiar themes to any scholar of Feyerabend, and parts of the Cardinal's speech could have been given by Feyerabend himself. The controversy began when Ratzinger actually cited Feyerabend's somewhat revisionary take on the Galileo affair. Years later, this citation, giving the impression that Ratzinger was "against" Galileo rather than apologetic for the church's historical sins against science, earned Ratzinger—by then Pope Benedict XVI—widespread student protests and a rescinded invitation to speak at Rome's La Sapienza University.<sup>2</sup> Evidently, aligning oneself with Feyerabend can be a fraught affair, even for a Pope.

The source of the controversy, Feyerabend's own depiction of Galileo, was a figure whom the church justly reprimanded for his universalistic methods and his attempts to compel his rationalism onto others. On this account, Galileo was a quintessential if early example of a scientist who disregarded important ethical, metaphysical, and social consequences of his work. Feyerabend uses Galileo to make a point about modern science writ large, and he often abstracts from (or simply neglects) historical details in order to do so.<sup>3</sup> Feyerabend's main use of Galileo in *Against Method* (1993) is to demonstrate how the history of science does not fit into the strictures of normative epistemology proposed by philosophers of science. Moreover, Feyerabend argues that if scientists did follow such recommendations, those like Galileo could not have arrived at conclusions that were so fruitful. For example, Feyerabend contends that Galileo, contrary to the recommendations of empiricists, frequently "disregarded phenomena" when they clashed with theoretical commitments to universal and immutable laws (1999a, 237). But Feyerabend includes more critical dimensions to his assessment as well: Galileo used deceptive rhetoric to conceal the "lacunae" and the "nonsemantic elements" that separate basic kinematic and dynamical motions (1999a, 126–7); he had narrow expertise but insisted that all astronomical matters be decided by specialists, not by any other elements of society (1985, 157); and he incautiously insisted that a predictively accurate model has special or even final claims to truth (1985, 158).<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Feyerabend wrote that the church rightly took into account a variety of popular and expert views on religion and astronomy; it understood that scientific models could not be related to reality without complex judgments; and it knew that ideas could injure people. Even though the church tried to administer the Council of Trent's "nonsense" on the interpretation of scripture, in the end the church was still "more straightforward, more honest, and certainly more rational" (1985, 160) than baroque modern administrative procedures that similarly restrict the introduction of

novel scientific outlooks. Feyerabend certainly objected to the church's authoritarian power, but not to the church's use of scripture in general, many aspects of which he actually endorsed.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the cultural authority of scientific expertise, then, the church had a more defensible position than Galileo.

Feyerabend was not the first modern writer to position Galileo in a less-than-heroic light. Other critical narratives preceded Feyerabend, removing Galileo from a triumphant champion of reason's victory over dogma, and one salient example here is Bertold Brecht's play *Life of Galileo*. Feyerabend had a close connection with the playwright: Feyerabend had declined the chance to be production assistant to Brecht after meeting him in Germany in 1949, which he later reported a source of great regret because it would have been a chance to change emotions and attitudes through the arts, and not just change minds with arguments (1978, 114).

Brecht's own take on Galileo shifted following the Second World War, as seen in the different versions of *Life of Galileo*. The earliest 1938 version of the play takes a celebratory attitude towards reason's triumph over bourgeois values and a medieval church power structure.<sup>6</sup> The later Los Angeles version contained a much more ambivalent assessment of science. In that version, Galileo is grim, no longer so heroic, and receives an even harsher indictment than the church had in the first version. The scientist's fault is his self-imposed ethical divorce from the consequences of his search for truth. The protagonist asks, "Are we as scientists concerned with where the truth might lead us?" Brecht wrote, "Galileo's crime can be seen as the 'original sin' of modern natural sciences" (Willett, 1980, 126). The intellectual has lost sight of serving humanity, and we find in Galileo a clear reflection of Robert Oppenheimer. Penned in early 1945, The Los Angeles version concludes with the prescient reflection that "Practically every new invention is greeted with a shout of triumph, which immediately turns into a cry of horror" (Ewen, 1970, 339).

Just a few months later, the atomic bombing of Japan made science's service to capitalism and destruction most apparent. Brecht wrote, "The atom bomb is... the classical end-product of [Galileo's] contribution to science and his failure to contribute to society" (Willett, 1980, 126). The conclusion drawn by Brecht—and many others—was that the truth that was supposed to enlighten and set free the masses could just as easily be used to destroy the masses.<sup>7</sup> The atrocities of the World Wars were indisputably adventures in secular nationalist ideologies, so it became tragically clear that religion is not the only social structure compatible with human barbarity. When the church is no longer the obvious social power broker or constraint on scientific advance, certain questions take on greater significance. First, one can ask what other ideologies shape, constrain, and promote the sciences when they are not placed in simple opposition to religion. Second, one can ask about religion's own functions when it is not taken simply to be

<sup>2</sup> The faculty of physics signed a widely circulated letter revoking the Pontiff's invitation: "These words [Feyerabend's], as scientists faithful to reason and as teachers who dedicate their lives to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge, offend and humiliate us. In the name of secularism of science and culture ... we hope that the incongruous event can still be canceled" (*La Repubblica*, 14 January 2008). For details and an assessment of the merits of Ratzinger's and Feyerabend's claims, see McMullin, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Feyerabend's analysis on this matter is partial and incomplete. Other analyses of the Galileo affair emphasize the point that Galileo's guilty sentence was largely based on his willful violation of the terms of his previous trial, rather than simply his scientific views. See Lindberg, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that some of Feyerabend's critiques here are also meant to be, in their own way, complimentary. Galileo's "propagandistic machinations" (1975, 72) were part and parcel of successful scientific tactics, without which science would not be able to accomplish what it has.

<sup>5</sup> Feyerabend praised the Bible's multi-layered arrangement (1999a, 178), and in a separate context he referred to the Bible as a worthy source with which to combat the dehumanizing tendencies of modernity because it was an eminently human document (1987, 259). Biblical stories might be "better adapted to our situation" than other narratives insofar as they are essentially about humans, relationships, and feelings.

<sup>6</sup> This first version came with a stamp of approval from Hans Reichenbach, who had discussed the manuscript with Brecht in Los Angeles (Willett and Manheim 1980, xi).

<sup>7</sup> 1947, when the revised *Life of Galileo* debuted in Los Angeles, is the same year in which Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* appeared; that treatise included similar themes about how the World Wars disrupted progressive Enlightenment promises that the search for truth would generate a better and more harmonious world.

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