Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion
edited by Ronald L. Numbers, Harvard University Press 2009

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Recommended Readings

GALILEO GOES TO JAIL and Other Myths about Science and Religion
Reviewed by Michael Zimmerman

In this wonderful, edited volume, University of Wisconsin history of science professor Ron Numbers turns some commonly accepted notions about the relationship between religion and science on their head.

Beginning with the largest falsity of all, "The greatest myth in the history of science and religion holds that they have been in a state of constant conflict," Numbers and his 24 co-contributors discuss fascinating but false beliefs. Arranged chronologically, the book opens by discussing myths associated with the medieval period including "that the rise of Christianity was responsible for the demise of ancient science," "that medieval Christians taught that the Earth was flat," and "that medieval Islamic culture was inhospitable to science."

Common misperceptions about Copernicus, Bruni and Galileo follow, along with the myths "that Rene Descartes originated the mind-body distinction" and "that Isaac Newton's mechanistic cosmology eliminated the need for God."

From the 19th century on, myths about evolution abound and eight are addressed here, including "that the Scopes trial ended in a defeat for antievolutionism" and that Darwin converted back to Christianity on his death bed.

In each of the 25 cases, the origin of each myth is explored and then each is exploded by good scholarship. The persuasive arguments will force readers to reexamine long-held beliefs and come to grips with a different relationship between religion and science than has previously been promoted.

- Michael Zimmerman is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler University.