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From Giordano Bruno to Brecht's 'Life of Galileo'

In his role as an advisor to the Holy Office, Bellarmine had discussions with Giordano Bruno, attempting to make him recant many theses considered heretical. During the trial, the Congregation had the cardinal examine a statement by the philosopher on eight contested propositions, but Bruno maintained his thoughts, and it was impossible to spare him from the stake.

Later, during the first inquiry into Galileo, Pope Paul V invited Bellarmine to dissuade Galileo from teaching the two main heliocentric theses, despite having an open stance towards the scientist. Shortly after the condemnation of heliocentrism by the Holy Office in 1616, Galileo requested and obtained a private meeting with Bellarmine. The latter signed a declaration stating that no penance or recantation had been imposed on him for defending the heliocentric thesis, only a denunciation to the Index, proving that there had been no trial against him.

This latter episode was brought to the stage by Bertolt Brecht in his work 'Life of Galileo' (Leben des Galilei), of which there are numerous versions and revisions. Below is an excerpt from the version edited by Giuseppina Oneto, translated by Emilio Castellani (Turin, 1964, and subsequent reprints).

In Rome, Galileo was invited to the palace of a cardinal. They offered him meals, they offered him wine, and then expressed a small desire. (...) BELLARMINO: Reason, my friend, serves little. Around us, we see nothing but distortions, misdeeds, weaknesses. Where is the truth? GALILEO (with fervor): I have faith in reason! BARBERINI (to the two secretaries): Don't write anything about all this; we're having a friendly scientific discussion. BELLARMINO: Consider for a moment: how much effort, how much study (however abominable it may be). Think about the brutality of those who have their peasants whipped half-naked in their fields in the Roman countryside, and the stupidity of these poor people who reciprocate by kissing their feet. GALILEO: A shame! Coming to Rome, I have seen... BELLARMINO: Well, of the ultimate meaning of these events, which remain incomprehensible to us (but of which life is woven), we have made a supreme Being responsible; we have said that certain goals are pursued with these actions, that all this is explained by the realization of a vast design. Not that with this we have achieved the end of all unrest, but now you come to reproach the supreme being for not having clear ideas about the motions of the world of the stars, while you, on the other hand, have clear ideas. Is this wise conduct? (...)"