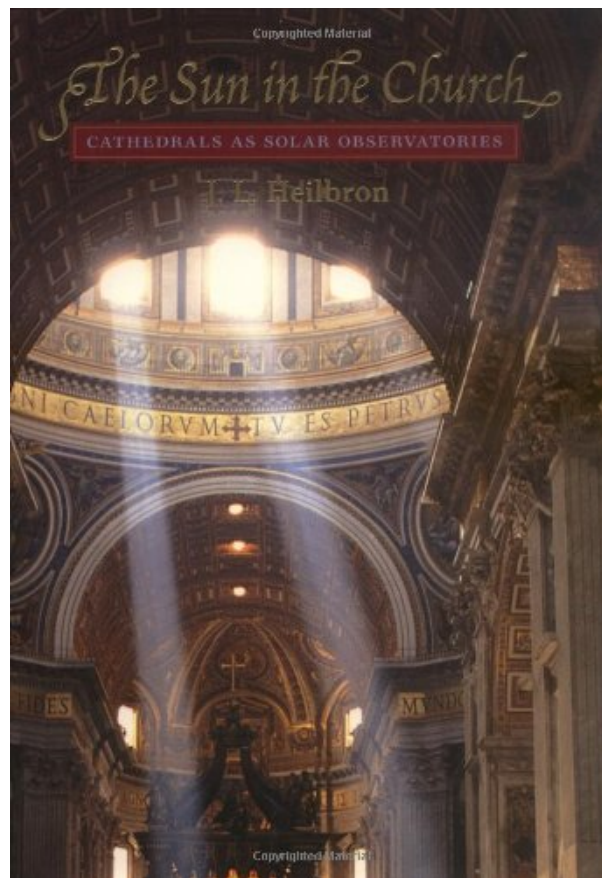
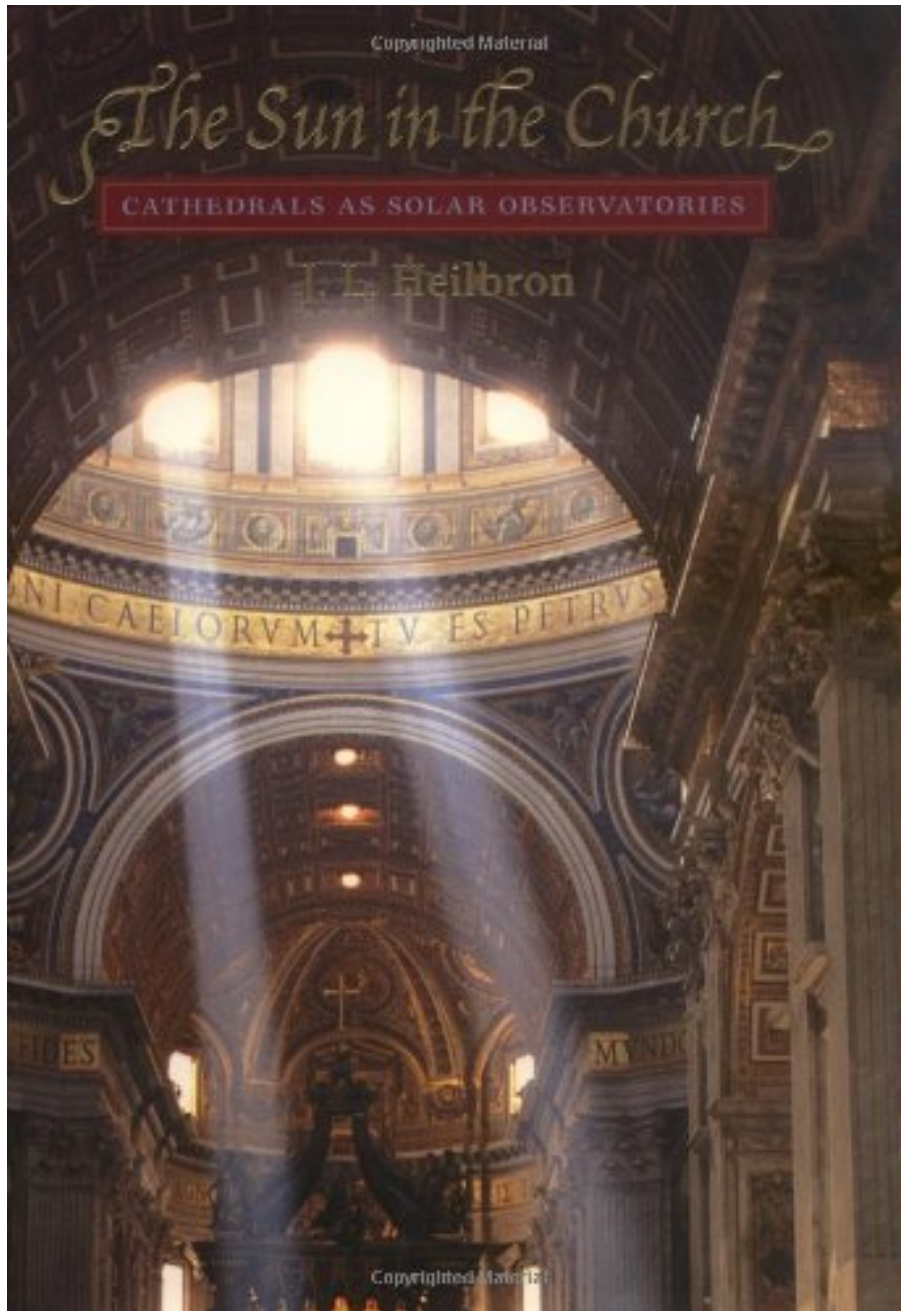


THE SUN IN THE CHURCH: CATHEDRALS AS SOLAR OBSERVATORIES BY J. L. HEILBRON



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Amazon.com Review

The Sun in the Church by J.L. Heilbron is a provocative work of scholarship that challenges long-held views of the relationship between science and Christianity. Heilbron's main point is simple enough: "The Roman Catholic Church gave more financial and social support to the study of astronomy for over six centuries, from the recovery of ancient learning during the late Middle Ages into the Enlightenment, than any other, and, probably, all other, institutions." Despite the persecution of Galileo, Heilbron notes, the Church actively supported mathematical and astronomical research--often designing cathedrals that could also function as observatories--in order to set the precise date of Easter (a crucial endeavor for maintaining the unity of the Church). Heilbron's fluid, engaging style brings his detailed reconstructions of 16th- and 17th-century Church politics to life. And his argument that scientific knowledge was deemed both morally neutral and politically useful during the Reformation and beyond yields an unusually interesting, complex, and human understanding of Catholicism in the early Modern period. --Michael Joseph Gross

From Library Journal

It is difficult for contemporary readers who live in an increasingly global world to comprehend the difficulty of establishing the correct date of Easter--the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the vernal equinox. Heilbron (formerly history and vice chancellor, Berkeley; currently Senior Research Fellow, Oxford) chronicles the ironic relationship between astronomy and the Catholic Church as it seeks the means to determine this date. This is the story of politically astute astronomers and cardinals who have to reconcile church doctrine with Galileo's universe. Heilbron deals specifically with four cathedrals, which, as a result of the "Easter date problem," function as both houses of worship and excellent solar observatories. The text is filled with fine detail and is richly illustrated. An erudite and scholarly work with extensive notes and bibliography, this may be a bit narrow in scope for the average reader; recommended for large public and academic libraries. AJames Olson, Northeastern Illinois Univ. Lib., Chicago
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THE SUN IN THE CHURCH: CATHEDRALS AS SOLAR OBSERVATORIES BY J. L. HEILBRON PDF

Between 1650 and 1750, four Catholic churches were the best solar observatories in the world. Built to fix an unquestionable date for Easter, they also housed instruments that threw light on the disputed geometry of the solar system, and so, within sight of the altar, subverted Church doctrine about the order of the universe.

A tale of politically canny astronomers and cardinals with a taste for mathematics, *The Sun in the Church* tells how these observatories came to be, how they worked, and what they accomplished. It describes Galileo's political overreaching, his subsequent trial for heresy, and his slow and steady rehabilitation in the eyes of the Catholic Church. And it offers an enlightening perspective on astronomy, Church history, and religious architecture, as well as an analysis of measurements testing the limits of attainable accuracy, undertaken with rudimentary means and extraordinary zeal. Above all, the book illuminates the niches protected and financed by the Catholic Church in which science and mathematics thrived.

Superbly written, *The Sun in the Church* provides a magnificent corrective to long-standing oversimplified accounts of the hostility between science and religion.

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From Scientific American

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Exacting but exact

By A Customer

The great advantage of Professor Heilbron's book is that he assumes his reader is not an idiot, and neither is he, which is refreshingly original these days. It's true, as the previous reviewer noted, that he throws around a lot of geometry and technical astronomy, but he also writes so clearly that it's straightforward, if demanding of attention, to follow. His style is, moreover, both witty and often droll, as when he notes that by the late seventeenth century the Jesuits were teaching Galilean astronomy, "using the convenient fiction that it was a convenient fiction. Those willing to call a theory a hypothesis could publish any astronomy they wanted."

27 of 27 people found the following review helpful.

I wish there were more books like this!

By Helmer Aslaksen

I'm a professor of mathematics, but I'm also a "closet historian". This book is a great work of scholarship both in terms of history and mathematics. It's true that if you don't know much about spherical astronomy, you may get a bit of shell-shock, but why don't you pick up Kaler: "The Ever-changing Sky" or Evans: "The History and Practice of Ancient Astronomy" to learn the basic. Then you can go back to Heilbron's book to appreciate it fully. Believe me, it's worth the effort!

PS. One of my students has written a mathematical supplement to this book. It's available on my home page. (Amazon won't let me give you the URL in the review, but just do a quick search on the web or look at the "about me section".) So far it only covers the first few chapters, but we hope to be able to expand on it later. I hope some of you may find it useful.

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