

# Newton's Religious Life and Work

by Robert Iliffe (2013)

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Isaac Newton (1642–1727) was born soon after the English civil wars had begun, and in the first two decades of his life he was exposed to deeply conflicting religious traditions. His local church of Colsterworth had a puritan minister intruded by the parliamentary authorities in the late 1640s, and in the second half of the 1650s he lodged with William Clarke, one of the most powerful parliamentary figures in Grantham. Nevertheless, although he had close contact with puritan groups, the senior and most influential male figures in his life were ordained members of the Church of England. His own father died a few months before he was born, and when he was three his mother married Barnabas Smith, the ageing rector of the neighbouring village of North Witham. William Aiscough, his maternal uncle and a Trinity College graduate, was rector of Burton Coggles, a village 5 miles east of Newton's home, Woolsthorpe Manor. His mother spent the vast majority of her time at Smith's rectory between 1645 and 1653, producing the three half-siblings who would be Newton's closest relatives after she died in 1679. In 1661, her best friend's brother, Humphrey Babington, recently reinstated as a fellow at Trinity, was made rector of Boothby Pagnell, which was just over six miles away. Although the barest facts of their relationship are known, Newton was close to Babington in his early years at the college and the latter almost certainly acted as a patron during this period. At the same time, Newton came to know Isaac Barrow, the first Lucasian Professor and later master of the college. In 1669 Barrow would pave the way for Newton to follow him as Lucasian professor, on the grounds that he himself had a more serious calling as a divine.<sup>[1]</sup>

At some point early in his career at Trinity College, Newton undertook an extraordinary programme of creative theological research, whose expansiveness, originality and radicalism was matched by only a handful of contemporaries. This programme of study was predominant and unrelenting, being occasionally interrupted by his work in alchemy, mathematics and natural philosophy. At some point in the 1670s Newton came to the view that a simple and authentic form of Christianity had been perverted by corrupters in the centuries following the life of Jesus Christ, producing the brand of religion that was now accepted as orthodox by the Roman Catholic Church and to some extent, by the Church of England. He concluded that the orthodox notion of the Trinity was a fiction that was invented in the early fourth century and subsequently promoted by servants of the devil. He came to believe that it was a form of idolatry to give to any other being the worship that was properly due to God, and that Jesus was divine but was not God.<sup>[2]</sup>

His polished writings on theology were not the musings of a dilettante but were the products of a committed, brilliant and courageous analyst. If he had published his ideas in the late seventeenth century, he would have had to leave the university, and would almost certainly have retired to what he would have seen as the freedom of his manor in Lincolnshire. He would never have enjoyed the senior political and administrative positions he was awarded in the early eighteenth century and indeed, would never have written the *Principia* or *Opticks*. With his appointment at the Mint, and the fame he garnered as a result of his work in the exact sciences, he shed the identity of a retired Cambridge don, and became an eminent metropolitan public figure. He was promoted to Master of the Mint on Boxing Day 1699, and in 1703 he was made President of the Royal Society, being knighted for his services to the state two years later.

As he lived on into his sixties and seventies, the world around him changed. The Stuart dynasty ended with the death of Queen Anne in the summer of 1714, and Newton made renewed interest with the court

of the first Hanoverian monarch. At a time when there was an unprecedented vogue among the general public for scientific instruments, lectures and books, he presided autocratically over the Royal Society and over British science. He did not give up or neglect his private religious study, though the language that coloured the bitter attacks on the corrupters of yesteryear grew less shrill. In the works on chronology and prophecy that were published after his death, there was little evidence of the passion, or indeed, of the specific denunciation of orthodox doctrine that permeated his early works. Since Enlightenment interpreters only saw the colourless productions from his later life, they were entirely justified in attributing them to the interests of an old man, whose creative juices had long since dried up.<sup>[3]</sup>

As it is to all people of faith, religion was central to Newton's life. Although there is obviously overlap between them, one should — or might — observe a distinction between Newton's religious actions and beliefs, and his technical theological researches. The latter consisted of his study of prophecy; the nature of God; the nature and historical role of Jesus Christ; the form and function of pre-Christian religion; the evolution of Christian doctrine, particularly in the century following the Council of Nicea (325 CE), and the documentary history of the Bible and patristic literature. He wrote up much of this work in the form of treatises, many of which are as original and monumental as the works in the exact sciences for which he is best known. The fact that they are not part of the canon of major religious writings from this period is a direct consequence of the views that they express; since they were radically heterodox and would have been considered formally heretical by the Church of England, Newton decided to suppress them.<sup>[4]</sup>

The emotional energy expended in the act of writing these treatises testifies to the fact that they formed part of the way he venerated God — that is, they formed the core of his religious life. As for his public worship, no suspicions are known to have been raised about his orthodoxy in the seventeenth century. According to his amanuensis Humphrey Newton, Newton worshipped regularly at the university church, Great St. Mary's, in the mid- to late 1680s, though he also remembered that Newton's attendance at the college chapel had been perfunctory. Here, and on those occasions when he took public office, he publicly subscribed to the doctrines of the Church of England, although this must have caused him serious concerns. We do not know whether he was a sincere member of the state church, that is, whether he exercised some sort of mental reservation when he publicly professed his allegiance to articles of faith that we know he privately denounced. His private writings say nothing explicit about his situation, and indeed show a degree of independence and eclecticism that make it impossible to confine his views to any single sect or position.

Although he did not belong to any nonconformist church, his earliest prophetic works have a flavour and an attention to the fate of the persecuted that is normally associated with nonconformist literature. As he saw it, the present world was corrupt, and only a small remnant of pure Christians (such as himself) were standard-bearers of the true faith. Being on the receiving end of persecution was a small price to pay for the proof it gave of the attendant assurance of salvation, and possible saintliness. On the other hand, evidence from [some early eighteenth century writings](#) suggest that Newton was happy to remain in the Church of England and was merely waiting for it to become so enlightened — and properly Christian — that someone with extreme opinions such as his own could worship within its fold.<sup>[5]</sup>

Like many other Protestants, Newton's religion was primarily derived from his reading and knowledge of the Bible but what he understood by the holy text was not always what could be found in the authorised King James Version. The latter was adequate for most things but when it really mattered, namely on key points relating to the nature of Christ and his relationship with the Father, Newton believed that it had been corrupted. Fortunately, he lived in age when the humanist project of locating and printing original manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments was thriving. Various polyglots had appeared since the Reformation, all of which showed that there was disagreement between different branches of Christendom over the expression, authenticity and meaning of specific texts. Catholic scholars, such as the great

exegete Richard Simon, did not need the support of such textual authorities since Catholics relied upon other documents to show that there had been a continuous public tradition supporting the orthodox account of the Trinity. High Church Anglicans, who promoted much of the critical work of locating and publishing evidence in polyglots and variorum editions, were divided over the wisdom of releasing evidence that could be used by enemies to show the precariousness of the textual evidence that underlay orthodox beliefs. Anti-Trinitarians like Newton could see at a glance in the polyglots that certain key Trinitarian proof-texts were absent from or understood otherwise in different Christian traditions, and like others, he personally sought out the most ancient manuscripts for evidence that these texts were absent. Newton not only contributed to the greatest variorum edition of Greek New Testament manuscripts published in his lifetime (the 1707 variorum New Testament edited by John Mill), but wrote [a series of destructive textual analyses](#) of all of those Scriptural texts used to support the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 1. The Son

It is impossible to say precisely when Newton began the innovative researches that would lead to his heterodox position on the Trinity. There is no sign that he was brought up in any radical tradition, or that he had contact with any anti-Trinitarians while he was at Cambridge. Newton was subject to both traditional Church of England and Presbyterian influences when he was a teenager, though it is unclear which of these if any was the source of his strictly puritan moral attitudes. The evidence indicates that his heresy was a consequence of his extreme Protestant dislike of Roman Catholicism and of idolatry in general. Nevertheless, there was something idiosyncratic about his researches. Even in his undergraduate days he was expressing radical views on the soul and the end of the world, and it is quite possible that from this time he was habitually disposed to deal critically, that is sceptically, with most of the key tenets of orthodox Christianity. However, Newton was unconcerned with many of the topics that exercised contemporary writers, and blank entries in his theological notebook on the topics of freewill, election and the remission of sins are indicative of a broader lack of interest in these subjects. Although he could and did shut himself off from the impure world around him, he showed no sign that he was concerned with attaining the sort of inner spiritual regeneration or ‘paradise within’ that was desired by other well known radicals such as Milton and Bunyan.<sup>[7]</sup>

Instead, Newton’s attention was almost wholly directed towards what could be ascertained empirically through the reasoned scrutiny of textual sources, whether these consisted of historical accounts of the early church, or the Bible itself, particularly the book of Revelation. By the late 1670s he had developed [an original view of prophetic history](#) that was nevertheless based heavily on the work of the great apocalyptic interpreter Joseph Mede. He retained most of Mede’s arguments regarding the internal order of prophetic images and the historical events that these images portrayed, but the doctrine underlying Newton’s view was very different from what Mede and others accepted. Mede and many other Protestants dated the onset of a Great Apostasy to the fourth century, following the appearance of seditious anti-Trinitarian heretics who, inspired by the writings of the presbyter Arius, swarmed through Christendom. Some time after this, they asserted, Roman Catholicism had perverted Christian doctrine and worship, and injected into it the spirit of persecution described as the Mystery of Iniquity in 2 Thessalonians 2:6. In Newton’s parallel narrative universe, the Apostasy had set in almost as soon as Constantine had become the patron of Christianity in the 310s. For Newton the architects of orthodox Trinitarian Roman Christianity were hideous idolaters and persecutors, rightly tortured and killed for their crimes by divinely inspired goths, Vandals and Huns. Underlying this view was a passionate hatred of the idolatry and persecution that was outlawed by the first two commandments. This drove both his anti-Catholicism and his anti-Trinitarianism, which were the core elements of the same terrible apostasy. In attacking the doctrinal foundations of the Trinity, he condemned by extension the central mystery of the Church of England.<sup>[8]</sup>

The doctrine of the holy Trinity stated that there was a godhead consisting of three distinct persons, each of which was fully God, that together made one substance, essence or nature. It was the foundation of the human relationship with the divine, and of the relationship between the orthodox supplicant and his or her church. The Trinity linked the visible church both to Christ's continuing presence and also to his physical body. This presence justified and made sacred the central religious and secular institutions in Newton's society and it was on these grounds a large majority of Anglicans held that anti-Trinitarianism was as bad as atheism. On behalf of the national church the state gradually lessened its harassment of anti-Trinitarians throughout the century. In 1612 Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman were the last people to be burned alive for the heresy in England, though there was a brief flurry of prosecutions in the wake of the publication of a number of anti-Trinitarian texts in the late 1640s. In 1648 the so-called Blasphemy Act re-instituted the death penalty for the denial of the Trinity, though the ultimate punishment was not in fact meted out to heterodox writers on the topic such as Paul Best, John Biddle and Thomas Hobbes. After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, many orthodox divines had doubts about the official doctrine of the Trinity as it was expressed in the Athanasian Creed, though most wisely kept their opinions to themselves.<sup>[9]</sup>

Although it took place in a different jurisdiction, Thomas Aikenhead's execution for anti-Trinitarian opinions in Scotland in 1697 was a shock to those who believed there was a new liberty to express such opinions. The year afterwards, another Blasphemy Act was instituted in England, this one offering much more lenient penalties for a wider variety of offences connected to the support in any public form or forum whatsoever of anti-Trinitarian views. The nonconformist minister Thomas Emlyn arrived at his own anti-Trinitarian position at exactly this time, and his trial and subsequent prosecution for blasphemous libel in 1703 showed what could happen to a committed anti-Trinitarian. The most obvious comparison is the case of William Whiston, later a close friend of Emlyn, who succeeded Newton as Lucasian Professor in 1701. Whiston published a number of works on revelation, astronomy and mathematics but from 1708 he began to make it known that he no longer believed in an orthodox version of the Trinity. After a protracted dispute with the university, he was officially deprived of his professorship in October 1710. Newton's intellectual courage may have been exceptional, but he had no inclination to follow Whiston's example.<sup>[10]</sup>

Newton's view of the radically subordinate nature of Christ the Son lay at the heart of his theological research. To understand the nuances of his position, it is necessary to briefly lay out two different strands of anti-Trinitarian thought. The most vibrant community of anti-Trinitarians in the seventeenth century saw themselves as part of a protestant tradition descended from the teachings of the sixteenth century writer Fausto Sozzino. Socinians held that Jesus Christ was not divine, that redemption did not require Christ's atonement for human sins through his crucifixion, and that his key role in history was as an exemplary moral individual. They denied the doctrines of original sin and of double predestination, and the vast majority were mortalists, holding that the soul died along with the body. A central emphasis was on the simplicity of the saving faith, and on the possibility of understanding what orthodox Christians took to be the central mysteries of the faith. Their strict Scripturalism, which emphasised the overwhelming importance of the Word for living a Christian life, was combined with deep scepticism concerning the authenticity or orthodox interpretation of Trinitarian proof-texts. Aside from their doctrines, Socinians gained a reputation for being arrogantly over-reliant on the application of their 'reason' as a way of understanding difficult passages in Scripture. With some justification, critics alleged that Socinians provided high quality tools of the trade for deists and even atheists.<sup>[11]</sup>

The other major anti-Trinitarian tradition constituted the great heresy against which orthodox Christianity had been forged in the fourth century. For many divines, Arianism was worse than Socinianism precisely because it shared more doctrines in common with orthodoxy, notably regarding the pre-existence of the Son. Not only were they alive to heretics who might lurk in the bosom of the church, but they were

especially attentive to orthodox accounts of Christ that emphasised the inferiority of the Son in terms of power and fore-knowledge. The vast majority of Arius's writings are known from the accounts given by his arch-enemy Athanasius, who wrote three orations against him — Newton knew the content and contexts of production of these texts as well as early modern scholar. Arius was believed by both supporters and enemies to have held a number of doctrines. Firstly, the Son was *created and not begotten* as the Wisdom or *logos*, and was not eternal. Arians held that “There was a time when he was not” and hence, a time when God was not the Father. Secondly, the Son was not naturally immutable, nor was he intrinsically omniscient or omnipotent; he was the most perfect of all of God's creatures though he was unlike any other creature. Arians did assert a unity between the Son and the Father but equality of will, knowledge or power was only granted at the behest of the Father. Finally, he was not *consubstantial* with the Father, meaning that he was not generated from the Father in the same way that Eve was held to have been derived from Adam's rib. Arianism had Scriptural warrant, and many of its proof-texts were also common to other anti-Trinitarian perspectives. Nevertheless, its emphasis on the pre-existence of Wisdom or the *logos* meant that many of the passages used in its support differed from those used by other anti-Trinitarians. [1 Corinthians 8:6](#), for example, was invoked by Arians to distinguish God from Jesus Christ, and was cited along with [John 1:1](#) to show that it was through Jesus Christ that the rest of the universe had been created.<sup>[12]</sup>

Like many other anti-Trinitarians, Newton found support for his views not merely in Scripture but also in the writings of many of the Church Fathers who had written before the great debates at the Council of Nicea. The vast majority of attendees of the council subscribed to the view that the Son was ‘homoousion’ with the Father. What this meant, and in particular, whether the word ‘homos’ should be translated into Latin as ‘same’ or ‘similar’, and ‘ousion’ translated as ‘nature’, ‘essence’ or ‘substance’, exercised Newton (as it did many others) for most of his life. Like everyone else, Newton knew that the term was not found in the Bible, and he utterly rejected the orthodox rendering of *homoousion* as ‘consubstantial’, which made Jesus Christ not just equal to God, but of the same *substance* as God. As rendered in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the Athanasian Creed asserted that the penalty for dividing the Substance of the Trinity was the eternal loss of hope of resurrection, but Newton did believe that Jesus Christ had a wholly separate substance from that of God. Hence, he denied that a physical part of God in the form of his Son had died on the Cross, and rejected the orthodox view that it was the human part of Jesus Christ, joined to the *logos* by some obscure ‘hypostatical union’, that had suffered and died. Rather, Jesus Christ was the intelligent, homogenous incarnate *logos* whose obedience and crucifixion had prompted God to elevate his status in such a way that he was entitled to be worshipped as the Messiah.

Whether writing in a prophetic or purely secular mode, Newton treated the question of the *homoousion* historically and empirically rather than metaphysically. It is by examining the way he used textual evidence that one gets to the real Newton. The texts he read were to be assessed both for what they said, and also in terms of the contexts and motivations that underpinned them. He understood that in the decades following the Council of Nicea (325 CE) opinions regarding the *homoousion* were fashioned for imminent political reasons or else to deliberately emphasise aspects of doctrine against perceived extremes. Many texts could be read at face value, especially when they made Newton's case about the prevalence of extreme subordinationist opinions in the periods before and after Nicea. However, Athanasius's vast rewriting of history had played a key role in a grand conspiracy to pervert the meaning of Christianity, and the texts composed by him and his followers were to be treated as self-interested. Although Newton portrayed his work as a mere exercise in textual or historical analysis, his doctrinal commitments were the rudder that guided his navigation through the chaotic waters of third and fourth century texts.<sup>[13]</sup>

## 2. The Father

The flipside of Newton's view of Christ the Son was his understanding of the overwhelming supremacy of God. Indeed, his accounts of God, offered up in later editions of his *Principia* and *Opticks*, were the best known of his statements on religion in the eighteenth century. In the '[General Scholium](#)' to the second edition of the *Principia* (1713), Newton straightforwardly read off the existence and nature of a benign and scientifically-expert creator from the marvellous order of the visible world. God was a living and intelligent being defined by his omnipotence and by his dominion over servants, and it was as servants that humans were to worship him. In asserting that the links between human servant and divine master were relational, Newton rehearsed the distinction he had made earlier in the work between absolute and relative time and space. God nevertheless had real and absolute features; he was eternal and ubiquitous, constituted space and time, and existed *substantially*. Although God's sensory capacity was perfect, Newton was adamant that he was *not* like humans. Indeed, God was *utterly unlike* humanity, lacking a body and being unreliant on organs in order to experience events in the world. Being insensible, little of God's nature was accessible to us, and we had as much idea of how God perceived or understood anything as a blind man had of colours. We might attribute human emotions to him in speech, but this was as a result of our own limitations.<sup>[14]</sup>

Newton did note that there was "some likeness" between human language and the true nature of God, and his protestations about the incomprehensible Otherness of God hardly tallied with his own boundless quest to understand the nature and attributes of the Creator. In the 'Queries' 20 and 23 of his [1706 Optice](#) he had announced to the Republic of Letters that he believed that space was 'akin to' the 'sensorium' of God. Indeed, the initial impression of the work had lacked the qualification, thus giving ammunition to Leibniz and others who condemned the materialist tendencies of English natural philosophy. In the 'Queries' and in the 'General Scholium' itself Newton contrasted the physical form and existential integrity of a human being with the nature and eternal existence of God. In the 'Queries', he had claimed that whereas human souls only perceived the images of things in their sensoria, God thoroughly perceived and understood things immediately in his quasi-sensorium. Moreover, he was more easily able to form and reform parts of the universe by mere acts of will than humans were able to move their bodies by acts of will. In these contrasts there was nevertheless some scintilla of likeness. As some commentators realised, these were dangerous thoughts. The anthropomorphic notion that God had a body was an old Christian heresy, guilty either of making all of nature divine, or of rendering God susceptible to the infirmities of mortals. The first of the Thirty-Nine Articles explicitly denied that God had any corporeal form, though Thomas Hobbes had vehemently asserted it in his *Leviathan* of 1651. In reply to Hobbes, critics found it exceptionally difficult to explain how God was capable of intervening in the world, and yet lack physical substance.<sup>[15]</sup>

Very early on in his career Newton believed that one could derive key features of the deity from certain capacities of human beings — who were, after all, created in the image of God. By exemplifying both human freedom and its capacity to move the human body, the faculty of the will was the most obvious aspect of humanity that mimicked the workings of God. In the 'Queries' Newton argued that the undeniable reality of freewill and self-motion was a standing refutation of Hobbesian materialism. On the other hand, he also claimed that we could infer from our ability to move our own bodies how it was that God had created the world and indeed how he maintained his intimate connection with the world. These later claims were based on unprecedented experiments, carried out in the 1660s and 70s, in which Newton attempted to determine whether the power of the imagination might extend outside the human body.

### 3. Politics and religious freedom

Newton's decision not to take holy orders at the end of 1674 marked a central point in his life. If he had ever entertained thoughts of becoming a clergyman when he entered the university, these had completely dissipated. It is impossible to prove conclusively that he had become a radical anti-Trinitarian by this time, and that his desire to avoid becoming a man of the cloth was prompted by sincere doubts about remaining in the Church of England. The fact that he had publicly subscribed to the articles of the state church only six years earlier, and would do so on regular occasions during the rest of his life, suggests that he was never prepared to act on such scruples. It is possible that he had the same deeply jaundiced view of the modern priesthood that he entertained about priests of yore, though on one occasion he is said to have explicitly denied this. As it was, it is likely that the decision to grant him dispensation from this requirement was based on two assumptions. In the first place, in the official letter mandating the dispensation, the Crown implied (though did not state explicitly) that ministerial duties would impinge negatively on his secular studies. This is consistent with the reasons given by other scholars who, successfully or not, applied for exemption from membership of the priesthood. Secondly, he must have convinced senior members of Trinity College that he was not suspect from a religious point of view. On the one hand, he remained a member of a college and of a university that were formally subject to a number of Anglican requirements. On the other, he was now in an identical situation to other laymen, who could use the same theological resources as professional divines to contribute to the cauldron of conflicting opinions in the Republic of Letters.<sup>[16]</sup>

By *choosing* to become a layman Newton gave himself a degree of latitude in his enquiries that was not available to ordained members of the church. Indeed, his private religious researches, like those he conducted in other areas, were pursued according to a deeply felt ethic of independence that he believed lay at the core of the protestant religion. This independence is obvious from all of his writings but it is particularly striking in his theological researches where he was eclectic, drawing from any tradition that might provide evidence in his favour. He accepted testimony from Roman Catholic sources when it suited, and indeed he had to, since Catholic authors had provided the bulk of information for his endeavours. When it was available, for example when he studied dubious Trinitarian proof-texts in the New Testament, he was more likely to take his cue from anti-Trinitarian authors. This independence also means that although we can describe Newton's theological position, we cannot usefully classify it according to the terms used by present day and indeed early modern commentators. As shorthand the terms 'Arian' and 'Socinian' describe different elements or flavours of Newton's position but they do not capture the heterogeneity of his approach. Although it is virtually impossible to discern changes in his thought over short spaces of time, it should also be remembered that Newton's positions shifted during seven decades of study.

The view that individual interpreters of Scripture should exercise the free use of their God-given understanding or 'reason' was common to a number of religious traditions. 'Reason' itself was a slippery concept. For Socinians and many others, most humans had been endowed with a natural reason that they were entitled and obliged to use in order to ascertain the meaning of words in Scripture. At its most extreme, this led to the assertion that Christianity was intrinsically 'rational'. Since the last claim explicitly denigrated mystery, Restoration Anglicans were extremely wary of asserting it, though most were prepared to state that Christian mysteries were 'above' and not 'contrary' to religion. Many defended the 'reasonableness' of the approaches adopted by the Church of England against unchecked or unrestrained interpretation, which was viewed as dangerous or a sign of solipsistic madness. In the context of religious study, the use of one's understanding required the exercise of considered judgement that was either guided by learned clergymen or based on well understood principles of exegesis. Anglicans feared that deists and anti-Trinitarians would make use of the right to use their understandings

and the critical tools that were now in the public sphere, in order to corrode the authority of revealed religion. By the 1690s their views had been shown to be well founded, as many enemies of organised religion used their books and their reason to dismantle the arguments of the orthodox.<sup>[17]</sup>

Like many others, Newton argued that what was required to be believed in order to be saved was readily comprehensible to even the meanest capacity, and the number of such tenets was small. More mature Christians like himself were required to study the Bible to ascertain the deeper but non-essential truths it contained, and were enjoined to discuss different opinions concerning them. This ‘creedal minimalism’ chimed with views expressed by many other laymen in the public sphere of learned religious debate. As such men became increasingly emboldened to discuss doctrinal topics in the Republic of Letters, so many divines were forced to explain in print exactly how it was that mysteries and other difficult parts of Scripture were *not* unreasonable. Bound up with the new propensity of laymen to dispute publicly with professional clergy was the notion that there was a certain degree of liberty of expression that amounted to a right. When in the Restoration the orthodox raged against deviant opinions they were often unsure on what basis they could clamp down on such views. Denying authors avenues of expression was another tactic in maintaining order, though the Church was unsure whether to do this by burning books or by threatening and prosecuting printers and authors. Newton’s immense confidence in his right to engage in free enquiry — particularly in his ‘closet’ — is in part a symptom of a more general attitude according to which the liberty to study was more significant than the defence of whatever doctrines this study might uncover.<sup>[18]</sup>

Newton’s religious views were bound up with a number of political positions. Save for those who sought martyrdom as a mark of their godliness, all radical critics of orthodoxy held that the fundamental right to a liberty of religious enquiry, if not freedom of religious opinion, required that a truly Christian state tolerate many different doctrines and forms of worship. All anti-Trinitarians subscribed to this view, having been subjected throughout their history to serious persecution. Newton’s relations with John Locke, who held religious and political sentiments close to his own, are of profound significance for understanding both his views about the freedom of religious enquiry and for grasping who he thought he was. In almost every sphere in which they worked, Locke articulated views that were consonant with Newton’s own. Locke was in exile in the Netherlands from 1683, and subsequently immersed himself in a number of different Socinian writings. On his return to England in 1689 he published immensely influential works on the human understanding, religious toleration, and on the constitution of a properly representative government. In particular, he defended an empiricist account of the way that individuals acquired information, a consequence of which was that men were obliged as a duty to God to be self-critical and to undertake personal quests for truth. Truly Christian states were to tolerate and indeed promote this sort of enquiry since as secular institutions they had no right to exercise jurisdiction over the salvation of souls.<sup>[19]</sup>

As Newton told Locke [when he probed the latter’s views in November 1690](#), he and Locke were part of a select group of inquisitive interpreters who had a right and duty to use their understanding, or reason, to deal with disputable or ostensibly difficult passages in Scripture. Although in the 1690 letter to Locke he may have couched his comments in a form that was consistent with what he thought Locke wanted to hear, Newton’s views on liberty of enquiry go back almost two decades earlier, to his earliest encounter with the public sphere. He does not seem to have followed Locke and others in calling for a complete separation of church and state. That said, he set the bar for being a truly Christian ecclesiastical polity very high, since any persecution carried out on religious grounds was a sign of an antichristianism. In Newton’s writings on the relations between state and church in early Christianity, those Christian empires that supported the Trinity as part of the official state religion were inevitably forced to indulge in obfuscation and persecution to make converts and to keep believers on the straight and narrow. By contrast, he claimed that those empires and groups that held anti-Trinitarian doctrines never persecuted

people for their religious opinions, and thereby showed themselves to be truly Christian. The was the opposite view from that adopted by orthodox church historians.

## 4. A Nasty Secret

It is in this context that one should consider Newton's Nicodemism, namely the practice of dissimulating one's real beliefs by using various tactics of silence or concealment. As Stephen Snobelen has shown, in the early eighteenth century, Newton displayed a number of different tactics to deflect potentially damaging questions about his orthodoxy. Earlier, no questions seem to have been raised about this; Humphrey Newton's testimony confirms that Newton worshipped regularly and publicly in the university church, and he unequivocally subscribed to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England when he took public office in 1689, 1696 and 1699. However, there is no doubt that he held opinions that were formally heretical by the standards of the Church of England. Although he revealed some of his theological opinions to a select group of individuals in the early 1690s, he may well have stated that his views were mere fancies, or that he was merely engaging in a piece of textual criticism. In the early eighteenth century, his views on the Trinity became known to a small coterie, and he had to do much more to avoid public suspicion. In 1709, he went as far as having his letter to Locke [translated into Latin](#) for printed publication but as usual this came to nothing. In this instance, the hostile reception given to William Whiston's admission that he held anti-Trinitarian views (very similar to Newton's), coupled with the fact that Newton could not guarantee his own anonymity, probably sealed the fate of the writings. As it was, he did what he had threatened to do half a century earlier, that is to only allow his writings to be published after his death. It is surely significant that when he came to burn a series of papers at the end of his life, among those he did not consign to flames are some of the most inflammatory theological productions of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>[20]</sup>

As a committed Christian, studying the Bible and various patristic works, and composing treatises, were the most important activities in Newton's life. Frustratingly, it is extremely hard to attach what we know of Newton's life at any point to the content of these writings. In the first place we would like to know how contemporary events informed his view of the past, and we would also like to know whether in writing about the early church, he was implicitly or explicitly reflecting on the present. The wholly private nature of Newton's textual legacy makes it exceptionally difficult to do this. He did not date his religious writings, and given his idiosyncratic use of paper, the analysis of watermarks and countermarks does not help historians locate the timing of these productions with any more precision than is available from internal evidence. This too, is often of little help. In his expansive private tracts on prophecy or church history it is virtually impossible to find any specific reflections on current religious or political debates. Since the printed theological volumes he consulted were usually published decades earlier, they are also offer little support in dating his work. Against this tale of investigative woe stand the theological treatises that are in the hand of Humphrey Newton (his amanuensis 1684–9), which allow us to definitively assert that his most important writings on prophecy and the most ancient religion were composed in the late 1670s or 1680s. Basic interpretive procedures that make full use of the Newton Project texts make it relatively easy to show which texts precede and postdate these documents.

For decades Newton immersed himself in a variety of patristic texts, to which he devoted vast amounts of time in the 1670s and 1680s. For Newton the content of these writings opened a window to the terrible events that had blighted Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. Their content described the corruption of doctrine but also the immoral and seditious behaviour of numerous individuals who were now held up as saints by both Catholics and Anglicans. Those works that described the unchristian behaviour of anti-Trinitarians were highly suspect. Orchestrated by Athanasius, they had been produced by the devil's most talented servants, and when their content did not suit his argument he appealed to the

self-interest of the authors and hence to the doubtful authenticity of the work in question. Although they had lived over a millennium before him, Newton came to life when he engaged emotionally and intellectually with the subjects and creators of these documents. The effects of these interactions must have spilled over into his personal dealings with others, and it must have been difficult to mix with his colleagues (not to say Humphrey) when he had spent the previous two days coming to grips with people he thought were some of the most vile individuals that had ever lived.

More generally, when Newton claimed that ‘Christian’ (i.e. anti-Trinitarian) states never punished individuals for their religious beliefs, and that ‘un-Christian’ states made an art form out of doing so, he was reflecting on his own condition. Although he only referred explicitly to the constitution of the Church of England at the end of his life, he believed much earlier in his career that a truly Christian state church should allow as broad a swathe of opinion as was consistent with social order. At the centre of his account was the relationship between idolatry and persecution. He thought that much of the human race was naturally prone to believe superstitious mysteries, but he believed that force was required both to convert people to incomprehensible opinions and also to keep people in an obnoxious religion. Although religious persecution was a key theme in his seventeenth century writings on the early church, we have no evidence of his views about the persecution of Quakers, Baptists and other nonconformists in the period. He had no truck with individual claims to ecstatic inspiration or the ability to prophesy, although as private religious opinions these posed no threat to society. However, as public professions of inspiration, they may well have struck him as a threat to civil order and thus worthy of severe punishment.<sup>[21]</sup>

Newton did begin to reveal his religious views to others in the early 1690s. He must have told Fatio de Duillier some time in 1691 that he believed that the Ancients worshipped according to a rational religion that was essentially Newtonian. [In late 1692](#) he answered pertinent questions sent to him by the scholar Richard Bentley regarding the implications for natural theology of the doctrines in the *Principia*. Bentley forced Newton to confront the fact that God was to all intents and purposes absent from the *Principia*, a tricky situation that Newton rectified to full effect in their correspondence. The direction of the planets revealed a divine hand, he claimed, as did the fact that the Earth was just the right distance from the Sun to support life. This correspondence was not published until after Newton’s death, but according to a diary entry made by the student Abraham de la Pryme at exactly the same time, Newton’s knowledge in divinity was already well known. In May 1694 he had frank discussions with the Scottish mathematician David Gregory, in which he discussed the so-called ‘classical scholia’ and indeed gave Gregory a copy of these texts for publication — presumably on the grounds that their authorship be sufficiently anonymised. Gregory’s notes of his meetings are particularly interesting because Newton revealed his potentially scandalous view that the Christian religion was essentially the same as that propounded by Moses, though without the corruptions of worship that were retained in the Mosaic version. In turn, Gregory must have very quickly passed on these opinions to the physician Archibald Pitcairne, who badgered Gregory regarding Newton’s religious opinions for over a decade.<sup>[22]</sup>

The most significant religious relations enjoyed during his life were with three men who each harboured different, if serious doubts about the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Samuel Clarke was tutored by Newton’s good friend John Ellis at Gonville & Caius College and would probably be Newton’s most trusted confidant during the latter’s lifetime. In the winter of 1698/9, Clarke replaced William Whiston as chaplain to John Moore, the Bishop of Norwich. Clarke made his name translating Jacques Rohault’s treatise on Cartesian natural philosophy into English, and transformed successive editions of the text by adding increasingly intrusive Newtonian footnotes. As a result of this, and his highly successful Boyle lectures on the nature of God, Newton trusted him sufficiently to allow him to translate his *Opticks* into Latin (for which Clarke received £500). It was *Optice* rather than the *Principia* that was the springboard for promoting Newtonian philosophy in Europe, and Clarke remained exceptionally close to Newton for the following two decades. It was around 1704 or 5, according to Whiston, that he learned that Clarke had

begun to suspect that the Athanasian version of the Trinity was not the same as the doctrine held by the early Church. Whiston later remarked that Clarke may have been inspired by Newton's own researches but although he frequently heard Newton expound on prophecy, Clarke's own account was not embedded in a prophetic matrix.<sup>[23]</sup>

Soon after Clarke's revelation about the Trinity, Whiston did his own research and discovered that Clarke was essentially correct. As Whiston began to make his views known to more and more people, so Clarke became increasingly cautious. In 1709, he was made rector of St. James and although a number of divines suspected him of heresy on the grounds of his relationship with Whiston, his stock rose. However, he fell to earth as a result of his *Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* of 1712, which appeared as High Churchmen tried to promote their cause by pointing to the existence of heretics in the bosom of the monarchy. Critics saw him as a more insidious and thus a more dangerous heretic than Whiston, and they influenced his demotion from his position as chaplain to the Queen. The third member of the trio was Hopton Haynes, a Mint employee whose anti-Trinitarian views somehow became known to Newton. The latter entrusted Haynes with a translation of his analysis of Trinitarian corruptions of Scripture, and Haynes later became a major promoter of the anti-Trinitarian cause in the 1730s and 40s.<sup>[24]</sup>

Although Newton did not publish any overtly anti-Trinitarian text in his lifetime, keen-eyed readers spotted something rather nasty underlying the doctrines in the General Scholium, and they connected it with Whiston's views and with Clarke's *Scripture-Doctrine*. John Edwards, for example, who had already assailed Whiston and Clarke in print, believed that the account of God's self-existence and apparent corporeality in the Scholium had been deliberately designed to support their principles. He even claimed that Newton and Clarke had "conferr'd Notes together" in concocting the General Scholium, though it is unclear whether he believed that Newton was anything other than a junior theological partner. He seems to have done a reasonable job in distancing himself from Whiston and his views, though Clarke was a different matter. Newton played an ambiguous role in the most famous philosophical correspondence of the century, namely [the letters that passed between Clarke and Gottfried Leibniz](#) in 1715 and 1716. Clarke combined a caricature of the Leibnizian position on freewill, miracles, and God's relationship to his created world, with an outline of Newton's views on a range of subjects. In turn, Leibniz, who had access to a very early version of Query 20 in *Optice*, in which Newton had stated that the world *was* the sensorium of God, stated his own position on these topics and duly caricatured the Newtonian position. Since Clarke was effectively defining what Newton's theology was for a European audience, there can be no doubt that everything published in this exchange occurred with the great man's approval.<sup>[25]</sup>

## 5. John Conduitt and Newton's Religion

If Clarke was Newton's most trusted lieutenant, the two people who probably knew him best lived for many years in his own house. At some point in the first decade of the eighteenth century, his half-niece Catherine, who moved into his house in the late 1690s, began a close relationship with Newton's chief patron Charles Montagu, the Earl of Halifax. Two years after Montagu died in 1715, Catherine married John Conduitt, a graduate of Trinity College and recently Deputy Paymaster-General to the British forces in Gibraltar. Newton apparently kept few secrets from these two, and they cared for him diligently in the last few years of his life. Virtually everything we know of Newton's private religious life outside of his papers derives directly or indirectly from Conduitt's labours. The possibility that Conduitt was thinking of writing a 'Life' of Newton before the latter's death is indicated by notes from a [conversation](#) conducted with Newton in March 1725. On this occasion Newton was remarkably free with his views on the beginnings of civilisation and the potential role of the Great Comet of 1680 in bringing about the end of the world. In any case Newton was clearly concerned that his reputation and legacy should make clear that he was a deeply devout Christian whose life had been devoted to the study of the Bible.

For various reasons, very little of the content of these works was revealed to the public until the late twentieth century. He died intestate on 20 March 1727 and there followed a series of family squabbles over how best to dispose of his papers for financial benefit. Acting on behalf of his wife Catherine, who was Newton's half-niece, John Conduitt was the only person able to post a bond for Newton's debts, on which grounds he claimed entitlement to all of the unpublished material. Those that were tolerably complete works were to be examined by the physician Thomas Pellet, and "printed if thought proper by him & the Adm[inistrato]rs & sold to the best advantage, & in the meantime be lodged with Mrs Conduitt." Although Pellet's language makes it look as if he censored papers according to an ethical whim, his brief was to uncover works that might be considered complete and hence ready for publication, and it is highly indicative of Newton's own working practices that only two of these texts were deemed in a state suitable for quick publication.<sup>[26]</sup>

Soon after Newton's death Conduitt began to draft a 'Memoir' for the benefit of Bernard de Fontenelle, Secretary of the Académie des Sciences in Paris, who was obliged to deliver an Eloge of Newton in the latter's capacity as a foreign member. In the 'Memoir' Conduitt noted that at Cambridge Newton had spent most of his time in his chambers, and had turned to history, chronology, divinity and chemistry when tired out by his "severer studies" in mathematics. Conduitt noted that Newton had studied all these subjects very thoroughly, and did the same when he came to London and had spare time away from Mint business. In such studies, "he was hardly ever alone without a pen in his hand & a book before him". As for his character, Newton was mild and meek, and a sad story would often draw tears from him. He was "generous & charitable without bounds", hated cruelty to humans or animals (and was loath to eat the flesh of strangled animals), and he often pontificated on the subject of mercy. A modest and simple man, "He was very temperate & sober in his diet but never observed any regimen". His humility was such that he did not despise anyone for lack of ability, but was shocked at bad morals, and lack of respect for religion was the only thing that would make him rebuke a friend — even if they were otherwise men of exceptional eminence.<sup>[27]</sup>

Conduitt claimed that Newton's attachment to religion was demonstrated by his exemplary life and also by the volumes of writings he left behind him, which showed that he was a "firm believer" of revealed religion. There was a defensive air to these statements, a feature that may well have been due to Conduitt's knowledge of the fact that Whiston was about to reveal Newton's true beliefs in the second volume of his *Collection of Authentick Records*. Indeed, Conduitt was aware that Newton's private opinions were far from orthodox. Indeed, he struggled to commit to paper what he knew of these views, which to some extent clashed with the vision of Newton he wished to portray. In the draft of the Memoir he initially wrote that Newton "constantly frequented the divine service," adding with some qualification that this was according to the Church of England. He deleted the entire passage in the final draft but at the last minute added "Il frequentoit l'église Anglicane" when he translated it into French for Fontenelle. Conduitt linked Newton's belief that Christianity could not be confined to the views of any particular sect to his extraordinary charitableness and his generally spotless moral demeanour. Newton, he wrote, could not "shew a coldness to those ~~who differed~~ <of another opinion> in matters indifferent much less admit of persecution of w<sup>ch</sup> he always shewed the strongest abhorrence & detestation". Ironically, these views of Newton would exert a major influence on eighteenth century accounts of his life and work only after they had been refracted through translations of Fontenelle's rendition. Rehearsing most of Conduitt's description of Newton's virtues, Fontenelle claimed that Newton adhered to the Church of England but was against persecuting non-conformists. He was not a supporter of natural religion but was "firmly satisfied" of the truth of Revelation — and his favourite book was the Bible. Following Conduitt's lead, Fontenelle noted that Newton had never married, explaining that he had probably never had the leisure to even contemplate it.<sup>[28]</sup>

Conduitt's struggles to order and articulate Newton's beliefs and practices in his 'Life' represent a compromise between what he knew of Newton's views, and the sort of devout man he wished to portray. In one draft on Newton's 'character', Conduitt brought together a number of his wife's reminiscences concerning Newton's great theological learning and religious purity. Bishop Gilbert Burnet allegedly reported that Newton had the "whitest soul" he had ever known, which he valued above Newton's intellectual achievements. Archbishop Tenison apparently offered Newton the Mastership of Trinity College if he would only take orders, and additionally "importuned him to [take] any preferment in the Church". Tenison's approach was made, according to the account, on the grounds that Newton knew more than all the rest of the English divines put together, though Newton blocked any further queries about a career in the church by telling Tenison that he could do it more service by remaining a layman. Both the Tenison anecdotes must come from 1700 (and not as Conduitt rendered it, in 1683), when Newton was appointed as a trustee at Tenison's Golden Square Tabernacle in London, very soon after Catherine had moved into his house in London. She related that Newton cut off all relations with his great friend, the chemist Francis Vigani, when the latter told "a loose story" about a nun, a story that is even more remarkable when one considers Newton's jaundiced opinion about nuns. On this subject, she also revealed that the two people with whom Newton *often* became upset when they spoke "ludicrously" about religion were Richard Bentley and Edmond Halley. Finally, another story from the last decade of Newton's life explaining why he resigned from his position on the commission to complete St. Paul's Cathedral, showed that he had a strong aversion to hanging pictures in the sacred space.<sup>[29]</sup>

When Conduitt's own narrative voice took over it was to add colour to the account of Newton's astonishing virtue and great religious conviction that he had outlined in the 'Memoir'. He lauded the latitudinarian sentiments found in Newton's 'Irenicum' and his 'Creed', adding that anyone who read the texts would find that he had left religion "less mischievous than he found it". Here, in a renewed effort to justify Newton's deviation from the normal behaviour of a member of the Church of England, Conduitt attacked those "of narrow principles" who might balk at Newton's "not going into every point of the highest orthodoxy". They should reflect, he thundered, on how advantageous it was to Christianity — in such an age of infidelity — "to have a Lay man such a Philosopher &c have spent so much Study upon divinity & so publick <& strenuous> an ~~espouser of~~ <advocate for> it." Conduitt also proposed an entire section that would deal with the fact that Newton was a sober philosopher who was immune to what his age condemned as "enthusiasm". "Fancy <never got> astride" Newton's reason, and unlike great philosophical predecessors such as Kepler, Descartes and even Halley, he had never subscribed to any of the more outlandish branches of natural philosophy such as the quest for the Philosopher's Stone and the belief in other worlds. Ultimately Newton had successfully studied revelation and the prophecies without enthusiasm or superstition — or which was worse, "commencing a Prophet".<sup>[30]</sup>

In the last few days of Newton's life, Conduitt had found him straining his eyes to read his Bible. The fact that Newton did not receive the Anglican sacrament on his deathbed was to say the least, potentially embarrassing, and Conduitt noted the fact alongside the statement from Pierre Bayle, "the greatest Freethinker of the last age", to the effect that it was rare to see serious religious devotion displayed by the greatest mathematicians. Turning this adroitly to his advantage, Conduitt cited [Luke 12:35–36](#) on the need to be always ready in case the Lord came knocking at one's door, adding that Newton needed "no other viaticum or provision for a journey to another world" when his entire life was preparation for another state. Rehearsing the account he had given to Fontenelle of Newton's research interests at university, Conduitt emphasised that without an outlet in music, sculpture or art, Newton's only relief came from his restless movement from one form of study to another. He compared this immaculate existence with that of Socrates, noting that while Socrates chose philosophy above morality, Newton was a more modest man who joined the two pursuits together.<sup>[31]</sup>

If Newton was somehow ordinary, he was also extraordinary. Pointing to his birth on Christmas Day, Conduitt noted that it would always be celebrated “for having brought a Saviour to mankind”. A professional military man by training, Conduitt compared Newton favourably with the greatest generals in history and indeed with any historical figure he could think of, and extolled him as one “who was to introduce a freedom of thinking & to teach men not to give up their reason to any Hypothesis <System> howsoever dignified or established”. Having lauded Newton as a founder of liberty, he then backtracked on an earlier piece in which he had exulted in the fact that Newton had not been born under the sort of oppressive Catholic regime that had restricted the activities of Galileo and Descartes. The Roman Church did not canonise anyone until they had been dead for a century, he noted, but *just supposing* that Newton had been born in a Catholic country, he would have been more deserving of canonisation than anyone who had received the honour. His virtues proved him a saint, Conduitt ventured, and his discoveries might well pass for miracles. At the end of it all Conduitt searched to find the right comparison for a man who was more than merely human, but whose own religious beliefs were a standing testament to the dangers of turning a human into a god. Accordingly he reached back to an anecdote allegedly regaled to John Arbuthnot by the Marquis de l’Hôpital at the end of the seventeenth century. While the Frenchman had asked whether Newton was like other men, Conduitt questioned whether Newton was human at all: “Even wee that knew him can hardly think of him without a sort of superstition w<sup>ch</sup> <demands [all]> our reason to check.”<sup>[32]</sup>

## 6. Newton’s Religion by his Friends

As he strove to complete a text fitting for its subject, Conduitt’s ‘Life’ was greatly informed by information given to him by Newton’s closest acquaintances. Within weeks of Newton’s demise Conduitt wrote to the Scottish mathematician John Craig, a friend of Newton for over four decades, asking him to write a short account of Newton’s scientific work. [Craig mentioned](#) that the “immortal” Newton had destroyed Descartes’s system of the world, which Craig described as a “Philosophical Romance”, and gave a useful summary of Newton’s work in optics and celestial physics. He also referred to Newton’s belief that there were an infinite number of stars, and remarked that it was “very probable” that each of these was a Sun with its own planetary system. Craig added that Newton had by no means neglected religion but had in fact devoted much more time to studying that subject rather than natural philosophy. Indeed, he had been motivated to attack the Cartesian philosophy precisely because he believed that it had been deliberately concocted to be the basis of atheism.<sup>[33]</sup>

Craig emphasised that Newton had expended great time and effort on chronology and ecclesiastical history; he originally wrote that “some person” had informed him about this but later deleted the reference to the informant. Craig was told that Newton “had drawn up in writing great Collections out of both; &, to show how earnest he was in Religion, he had written a long explication of remarkable parts of the old & new Testament, while his Understanding was in its greatest perfection, lest the infidells might pretend that his applying himself to the study of Religion was the effect of Dotage”. The same person told him that Newton had suppressed these writings on the grounds that they showed his thoughts “were some times different from those which are commonly receiv’d”. This would have engaged Newton in disputes, Craig averred, which he tried to avoid wherever possible. Conduitt should now publish these texts so that “the world may see that S<sup>r</sup> I: Newton was as good a Christian as he was a Mathematician and Philosopher.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Aside from Conduitt and his wife, the most detailed information about Newton came from his friend William Stukeley, the antiquarian who had moved to Grantham in the summer of 1727. On behalf of Conduitt, Newton’s physician Richard Mead asked Stukeley to garner information about Newton from anyone who had known him, and he [passed Stukeley’s information](#) back to Conduitt. As it happened, the only person Stukeley was able to interview was Katherine Vincent (née Storer), who had lived in the same

house if not the same universe as Newton when he was lodging in Grantham. She told him that Newton always had a soft spot for her and she might have got married if it were not for the demands of his fellowship. He also met Humphrey Newton, the man who had been Newton's amanuensis from 1684–9 during the epoch-making years in which Newton wrote the *Principia*. Humphrey related some tales about Newton's superhuman work ethic and also about his absent-mindedness, which coincided with other stories about Newton's earlier life that presumably came from Katherine Vincent.<sup>[35]</sup>

Among his sometimes vague reminiscences, Humphrey did include significant information about Newton's religious life. He recalled that although Newton frequented the university church Great St. Mary's on Sundays, he only rarely graced the college chapel with his presence. Four decades after the event Humphrey "suppose[d] the reason" to be that Newton found it difficult to get up in time in the morning, having stayed up until 2 or 3 a.m. the previous night. Similarly Newton's "attachment to his studys" allegedly prevented him from going to chapel in the evenings. [The following January](#) Humphrey gave Conduitt a similar account, noting that Newton's absence from the chapel was due to the fact that it was the time of the day that he devoted to rest. Similarly, it was his "indefatigable Studyes" that kept him from chapel in the afternoons: "so y<sup>t</sup> he scarcely knewe y<sup>e</sup> Hour of Prayer". Despite Humphrey's evident admiration for his fellow countryman, it remained strange so many years later that Newton had been so neglectful of worship. When Conduitt wrote to him again in February to prompt further memories of Newton's personal religiosity, Humphrey merely repeated the line that Newton's intense studies must have prevented him from engaging in private prayer.<sup>[36]</sup>

As an example of Newton's absorption in his work, Stukeley relayed to Conduitt his own anecdote about Newton sometimes donning his surplice to go to Great St. Mary's. Although this was apparently one of the stories that was "in every bodys mouth" when he was an undergraduate, Stukeley changed his account a quarter of a century later when he came to write a [life of Newton](#). Now he related that on days when he was obliged to put on his surplice, Newton would go to St. Mary's instead of to the college chapel, and had sometimes worn his surplice to dinner. Stukeley turned this into an example of Newton's mind entering into "its essential and true life. & enjoy[ing] those superlative pleasures arising from contemplations of the most worthy sort, nearly approaching to angelical". As for his religious studies, Stukeley noted that he had "studied everything", and he used the same phrase in describing Newton's knowledge of the history and architecture of Solomon's Temple. Newton's chronology was "very particular, & likewise solid", but he had contracted the history of the world too much. His knowledge of prophecy was also sound, Stukeley admitted, especially in his claim that God adumbrated his history of the world in his depiction of the rites and settings of the Jewish temple. All this knowledge was built up as a result of his Sunday study of the Bible, when he "turn'd over the sacred volumes, with great diligence, and full conviction of the divine Sp<sup>t</sup>. that dictated them".<sup>[37]</sup>

Stukeley, an ordained clergyman in the Church of England, felt obliged to use the example of England's greatest genius to counter the tide of rank scepticism, immorality and infidelity that was apparently corroding English life in the middle of the century. Newton was polite, dignified, virtuous, suitably "pleasant" when the situation demanded, and his generosity was reassuringly substantial. Above all he was a pious man and an intire christian, upon fundamental principles. he knew the evidences of it were as strict demonstrations in thir way as his *principia*. no man in England read the Bible more carefully than he did; none study'd it more, as appears by his printed works, by many pieces he left, wh are not printed; & even by the Bible, wh he commonly used, thumbd over, as they call it, in an extraordinary degree, with frequency of use.

Tellingly, Stukeley noted that "many persons were attentive to his conduct", and he "could not excuse himself from the weekly solemn adoration of the supreme being". Newton knew the necessity and expediency of the public profession of religion, and was aware that religion was nothing without public

practice. Stukeley even claimed that Newton's great mind experienced "the most divine pleasure in the public acts of adoration of the most omnipotent fountain of all things". This was particularly so in the case of the Church of England, which according to Stukeley, of all churches most strongly affected a rational learned and pious person.<sup>[38]</sup>

Stukeley's protestations about Newton's visible allegiance to the state church was undoubtedly motivated by recently revitalised rumours that Newton was an anti-Trinitarian. Indeed, Stukeley mentioned that a number of people of "heretical, & unsettled notions, particularly those of Arian principles", had tried to enlist Newton to their party, but he claimed that this was entirely wrong. As we have seen, tales of Newton's heterodoxy had been raised in his own lifetime, and they resurfaced on his death. The Scottish mathematician Colin MacLaurin initially told the Presbyterian clergyman Robert Wodrow in November 1727 that after some enquiries to Newton's trustees he had been told that there was "nothing of any importance found among his papers, save his large Chronology, which is now [sic] printing, and will be published ... there are very great expectations from it." MacLaurin was apparently reassured that there was nothing in the archive that was relevant to the controversy over Clarke's *Scripture Doctrine* "or any other subject in Divinity". Wodrow, who had noted two years earlier that Newton was the source of much of Clarke's theology, recorded that there had been rumours that Newton had been part of a group intent on reviving Arianism. He added rather hopefully that it was good that "Sir Isaack hath meddled very little with Divinity throu his life" and concluded that this would stop any "innuendos" on a subject that Newton had perhaps not thoroughly considered from being "swallowed down" by the vulgar. However, in 1729 MacLaurin told him that Newton's papers contained some 'peculiar thoughts' on prophecy, and that Newton, whom he had heard 'express himself pretty strongly upon the subordination of the Son to the Father,' effectively agreed with Clarke. According to MacLaurin, who was probably the source for John Craig's views on Newton's heterodoxy, Newton believed that the earliest Christian church did not hold the same view of the Trinity as was currently maintained, which was putting it mildly, though he added that Newton was extremely cautious in expressing himself in these matters.<sup>[39]</sup>

A number of works may also have prompted Stukeley to defend Newton's orthodoxy when he did. Although Newton's most radical productions remained unpublished until the twentieth century, his two posthumous publications on ancient chronology and prophecy offered grist to the critical mills of defenders and assailants alike. Arthur Young, Arthur Bedford and Daniel Waterland all spotted something theologically suspect about these publications, even though they contained nothing of the overt and vicious antipathy towards Trinitarian doctrines that marked his earlier writings. In the late 1730s a number of scholars such as Caspar Wettstein and John Berriman learned that Newton was the true author of Le Clerc's copy of the letter to Locke on Trinitarian corruptions of Scripture. John James Wettstein drew from this text in his 1751–2 edition of the Greek New Testament, and it was an edition of this version, by now in the Remonstrants' Library in Amsterdam (and lacking the first four paragraphs) that was published in 1754. In 1747, Hopton Haynes claimed that it was fear of persecution — and allegedly, his distaste of disputes — that had stopped Newton from doing the right thing, and from leading a return to the primitive Christianity demanded by Whiston. Whiston told Berriman that it was Haynes's lack of discretion following his translation of Newton's Two Notable Corruptions into Latin in 1709 that had prevented Newton's support from being made public, though Whiston's own printed references to the backing of "a very great man" for the restitution of Arian primitive Christianity are more likely to blame for Newton's reticence. In any case, Newton had his own reasons, derived from his analysis of prophecy, for believing that the great reformation of religion that would precede the second coming of Christ was hundreds of years in the future.<sup>[40]</sup>

Whiston, who died in the August of the year that Stukeley completed his manuscript 'Life', was the most obvious target of Stukeley's ire. He had published his stunning revelations about Newton's private beliefs in 1728, in part as a response to the publication of Newton's *Chronology*. After commending some of

Newton's views concerning the precepts of the sons of Noah, including the injunctions to be merciful to brute beasts and to refrain from eating blood and meat from strangled animals, he embarked on an exposé of his heterodoxy that caused the Conduitts and many others to squirm. Whiston had gained much insight from speaking with Newton, though it remains unclear just how much leeway he was given to read Newton's actual writings. The 'great man' to whom he had referred much earlier was now revealed to be Newton; he confirmed that Newton believed that God was the direct cause of universal gravitation, and noted that Newton had condemned modern courtiers (and presumably many others) for "laughing themselves out of religion". Newton agreed with Whiston that infant baptism as practised by early Christians was not of babies but of those who had been catechised and trained up in Christian principles. He also apparently concurred that in the first ages of the church bishops had to be both elected by the people and ordained by other bishops in order to qualify for their office. In the fourth century, once Christianity became the state religion under Constantine, churchmen became politicians and acquiesced in political designs in order to confirm their preferments. For Whiston, who had suffered more than most for speaking truth to power, the politicisation of religion was as outrageous as it evidently was for Newton.<sup>[41]</sup>

Like Stukeley after him, Whiston was concerned to show that Newton had not simply turned to his religious studies once his scientific pursuits had ended and old age had set in. Indeed, he was the first to state publicly that Newton had spent a great deal of time examining the history of the fourth century church while still a young man. As we have seen, his most devastating claim was that Newton was an Arian who believed that Athanasius was the "very wicked Instrument" of the corruption of pure Christianity. Some of his intimates, Whiston continued, had known of his private views and "notwithstanding his prodigiously fearful, cautious and suspicious temper" he could not conceal this from these friends, presumably Haynes and Clarke. Whiston was well aware of the fact that Newton had sent his dissertation on two corruptions of Scripture to Locke, and also revealed that Haynes had translated the text into Latin. Haynes had told Whiston that Newton had wanted them published, though what prompted this Whiston could not imagine. These, and other related papers on failed Athanasian efforts to pervert two other texts of scripture, were now in the hands of Newton's executors, and Whiston briefly began a campaign for them to be published in full.<sup>[42]</sup>

Whiston had suffered immensely for evangelising openly what Newton had studiously kept secret, and he reminded his readers that if Newton had felt under similar virtuous obligations as himself to publish the same views, those who had treated Whiston so badly "must 30 or 40 years ago have *Expell'd and Persecuted the Great Sir Isaac Newton*". Now there was no need to have scruples about their publication. Whiston referred specifically to two unpublished works, and a third, anti-Athanasian work *The True History of the Great St. Athanasius* that was printed but which was probably not by Newton. There were many other writings relating to the topic, and in this area Whiston admitted that Newton had long seemed to him to have been one of the "greatest Masters that ever was". Whiston condemned the suppression of any evidence relating to revealed religion, and asserted that he "and all impartial and inquisitive men", would be delighted to see Newton's opinions on these matters published openly. In an early impression of Whiston's work he specifically condemned Thomas Pellet, for engaging in "laycraft" through the suppression of Newton's religious papers. Whiston charged that Pellet was now claiming that at the end of his life Newton was an infidel, and he urged him to publish any texts supporting that claim "on the peril of his being otherwise charged with open falsehood and forgery". Whiston may well have withdrawn the claim on the grounds that Pellet was not in fact the legal custodian of the papers, as Whiston thought, and had been tasked only with determining which texts could be published in their current state. As it happens, none of the printed versions of Whiston's text that I have seen refer to Pellet's alleged 'suppression' of Newton's work...

*(For the entire narrative, read the  
"Priest of Nature, The Religious Works of Isaac Newton by Robert Illiffe.)*

