

ON NEWTON AND THE TRINITY

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In recent years a number of scholars have claimed that the eminent scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727) denied one of the basic tenets of Christianity: the doctrine of the trinity.

In Defence of Newton

This charge has been disputed by Dr. Hanson.¹ After extensive reading about Newton, Hanson finds that the best demonstration of Newton's alleged anti-trinitarianism amounts to little more than his close association with William Whiston, Newton's successor at Cambridge, who was dismissed in 1710 on grounds of his Arianism. Hanson concludes:

In my reading of what Newton himself wrote, and by analyzing the claims of his biographer detractors, I find Newton to be a Bible-believing Christian who would be comfortable attending my small semi-rural blue-collar Baptist church.

According to Hanson, scholars are repulsed by Newton's literal belief in the Bible and are grieved that the truly great scientists were Christians. Hence the need to "besmirch, discredit and, ultimately, vilify Newton".

In his editorial in the same issue, Dr. Bouw comments that the evidence against Newton is purely circumstantial, based on friends, associates, and a tract (not written by Newton) found in Newton's files after his death.

Newton's Notebooks

Now, I agree that all biographers have their biases and that, particularly in this age, many are predisposed against Christianity. Thus we should read them with discernment. Yet we must ask: is the case against Newton's theological orthodoxy really that weak? Is it merely a dubious case of guilt by association and of purely circumstantial evidence?

I have become convinced that there is much more to it: it has been asserted that Newton stands condemned by his own words. Although these words were not published during his lifetime, they are to be found in his private notebooks, wherein he recorded his

personal theological thoughts.

For an extensive account of the contents of these notebooks I refer the reader to two very recent biographies of Newton: Richard S. Westfall *The Life of Isaac Newton*,² and Gale E. Christianson *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times*.³ I shall briefly recount a little of what these authors write about Newton's notebooks, quoting freely from their books.

In one notebook⁴ it is clear that, already in the early 1670's, Newton was absorbed by the doctrine of the Trinity. On this topic he studied extensively not only the Bible, but also much of the Church Fathers. Newton traced the doctrine of the trinity back to Athanasius (298- 373); he became convinced that before Athanasius the Church had no trinitarian doctrine. In the early 4th century Athanasius was opposed by Arius (256-336), who affirmed that God the Father had primacy over Christ. In 325 the Council of Nicea condemned as heretical the views of Arius. Thus, as viewed by Newton, Athanasius triumphed over Arius in imposing the false doctrine of the trinity on Christianity.

Newton further asserted that, in order to support trinitarianism, the Church deliberately corrupted the Bible by modifying crucial texts. For example, Newton claimed that the well-known words of I John 5:7 ("there are three that bear record in heaven, the father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one") were not in the original, pre-4th century Bible (Newton, it seems, was not a King James only man). Newton writes that "the Fathers...preferred to desert the Scriptures than not to condemn Arius". Soon thereafter a universal corruption of Christianity followed the central corruption of doctrine: in the 4th century trinitarianism fouled every element of Christianity.

Newton's anti-trinitarianism is evident also in his interpretation of Revelation. According to Newton, the seventh seal began in the year 380, when trinitarianism was officially ratified at the Council of Constantinople. The great apostasy was not Romanism, but trinitarianism, "the false infernal religion", to quote Newton's own words.

In another private document (from about 1673) Newton drafted a list of 12 points, which summarizes his view of the nature of Christ.⁵ There he explicitly declares only the Father to be supreme; the Son is a

separate being, different from the Father both in substance and in nature; Christ is not truly God but is the so-called Word and Wisdom made flesh, divine to be sure, but only so far as divinity is communicated by the Father.

Westfall and Christianson give further reasons for believing Newton to be a follower of Arius. I shall mention here only that, regarding Newton's connection to William Whiston, it was a more than mere association. Consider Whiston's remark about Newton:

...he had early and thoroughly discovered that the Old Christian Faith, concerning the Trinity in particular, was then (4th century) changed; that what has been long called Arianism is no other than Old Christianity.⁶

This indicates that Whiston believed Newton to have been favourably inclined towards Arianism. Given the close interaction between Newton and Whiston, one suspects that Whiston's Arianism was, at least in part, due to Newton's influence.

Conclusion

In summary, I believe that the case against Newton is much stronger than has been assessed by Hanson and Bouw. It cannot be attributed to mere anti-Christian bias on the part of Newton's biographers: there is just too much damning evidence for it in Newton's own private writing. Upholding Newton as an orthodox Christian can be done only by declaring Newton's biographers to be outright frauds. Personally, I doubt that these scholars would permit their biases such license as to thus jeopardize their professional reputations: their position could easily be discredited by checking the original sources. Indeed, I would argue that the onus is on the supporters of Newton to do just that.

So I conclude that the evidence indicates that Newton was in all likelihood a unitarian. A disappointing conclusion, for I have always highly esteemed many aspects of Newton's works. Yet, on the other hand, we must keep things in proper perspective. I have admired also much of Plato, Euclid, Archimedes, and various other non-Christians. It is undeniable that unbelievers can make great achievements, both in the arts and the sciences. Man, even in his fallen state, still retains some vestige of the image of God. Moreover, Newton's theological blunders demonstrate that even great men can grievously err. Let us then be

discerning, testing the spirits in the light of God's inerrant Word, accepting that which is good, and rejecting the rest.

Relative to the methods of theoretical cosmology, quantum logic and the concept of INDIRECT verification, a "vacuum" as represented by a "dense" field of ultimate subparticles exists in physical reality due to its predictions of natural-system behavior. Further, such a field is as "firm" as anything that can ever be measured by any natural means since it is not affected by any natural process. The field can only be influenced by pure ultranatural processes.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Hanson, James N. 1996. "Newton Was Not an Arian", *Biblical Astronomer* 6(75):31-32 (Winter 1996).
- ² Richard S. Westfall, 1993. *The Life of Isaac Newton*. (Cambridge University Press).
- ³ Gale E. Christianson 1994. *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times*. (The Free Press: New York).
- ⁴ Christianson (p.253) refers to it as Keynes Ms.2, from the Keynes Manuscript Collection, King's College, Cambridge, England.
- ⁵ Christianson (p.253) refers to Yahuda Ms.14, f.25, from the Yahuda Manuscript Collection, Jewish National Library, Jerusalem.
- ⁶ William Whiston *Collections of Authentick Records Belonging to the Old and New Testament*. (London, 1928) II:1077, as cited in Christianson (p.470).

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