

Newton, Isaac (25.12.1642 Woolsthorpe - 20.3.1727 London), natural philosopher, lay theologian and prophetic exegete. After an education at the King's School in Grantham, Newton matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1661, becoming a fellow in 1667. During his Cambridge years he invented the calculus, discovered the heterogeneous nature of light and developed the celestial physics for which he is now famous. The results of his revolutionary work were published in his *Principia* (1687) and *Opticks* (1704). In 1696 Newton moved to London to become Warden of the Royal Mint. He was elected President of the Royal Society in 1703 and knighted in 1705.

Known primarily as a student of nature, the recent availability of Newton's vast collection of theological writings reveals that his study of theology was as important to him as his mathematics and physics. Shortly after becoming Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge in 1669, Newton began to study theology in earnest. His research into the Bible and church history led him to conclude that the Trinity was a pious fraud foisted on Christianity in the fourth century by Athanasius. Newton saw the introduction of the novel term *homoousia* and extra-biblical, Hellenic metaphysics as a blight on the purity of primitive Christianity. Because denial of the Trinity was illegal, and since he believed the higher truths of theology should not be taught openly, Newton adopted a Nicodemite stance and shared his unorthodox beliefs only to a select group of acolytes. Nevertheless, his anti-Athanasian views filtered into the public sphere through the writings of the Newtonians William Whiston and Samuel Clarke.

Newton's deity is a God of absolute power and dominion who intervenes directly in the human and natural worlds. Christ is the Son of God, pre-existent before his birth, but united with God by will, not substance. Christ also plays a powerful role in Newton's eschatology and his sacrificial blood is essential to his conception of the atonement. Newton's heresy extended to mortalism and a personified Satan akin to the Jewish *yetzer ha-ra*. Furthermore, he accepted believers' baptism in theory, if not in practice. Newton's library, reading notes and manuscripts reveal a range of theological interests including orthodox Christianity, Judaism, the Kabbalah and Socinianism. His theology is an eclectic blend of innovative exegesis, puritanism, Anglicanism, Judaism, ancient Arianism and contemporary antitrinitarianism dissent that defies easy classification.

Following in the premillenarian, historicist tradition of Joseph Mede, in the 1670s Newton began an immense study of biblical prophecy, which he believed foretold the fall of Catholicism and the corrupt Trinitarian Church, the preaching of the true Gospel, the return of the Jews to Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple, the battle of Armageddon, a literal *parousia* and the establishment of the Millennium—events he put off until the twentieth century or later. Newton asserted that identifying the Antichrist was “a duty of the greatest moment” and saw in fulfilled prophecy a “convincing argument” for God's existence. Some of his later writings on Daniel and Revelation were published in 1733 and in this form played a minor role in the rise of Protestant fundamentalism.

Although Newton recognized disciplinary distinctions, interpenetration between his natural philosophy and theology exists at various levels. Newton himself writes about the connection between the Books of Nature and Scripture, affirming the unity of all God's Works. Newton believed the laws of nature he revealed in the *Principia* evinced the hand of God. Public expressions of natural theology are found in the Queries to the *Opticks* and the General Scholium to the *Principia*. Instances of interaction include his providentialist cometography, his conception of ancient temples as templates of the cosmos, his attempt to recover the *prisca sapientia* in both natural philosophy and religion, and his belief that ancient priests were both theologians and philosophers of nature. The most profound example is Newton's influential concept of absolute space and time, which he

believed to be coextensive with God's omnipresence and omnitemporality. Newton fashioned himself as a priest of nature and committed himself to the reformations of natural philosophy and religion. Both these reformations involved the rejection of vain hypothesizing and the *a priori* introduction of metaphysics. For Newton, God was to be found through the humble and inductive study of both God's Word and His Works.

Vf. u.a. Principia, 1687 • Opticks, 1704 • Chronology of ancient kingdoms amended, 1728 • Observations upon the prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John, 1733 • Über N.: F. MANUEL, The religion of Isaac Newton, 1974 • R.S. WESTFALL, Never at rest: a biography of Isaac Newton, 1980 • J.E. FORCE and R.H. POPKIN, eds., Newton and religion: context, nature, and influence, 1999 • I.B. COHEN and G.E. SMITH, The Cambridge companion to Newton, 2002.

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