

Isaac Newton, heretic: the strategies of a Nicodemite

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There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night...

John 3: 1–2

A lady asked the famous Lord Shaftesbury what religion he was of. He answered the religion of wise men. She asked, what was that? He answered, wise men never tell.

Diary of Viscount Percival (1730), i, 113

NEWTON AS HERETIC

Isaac Newton was a heretic. But like Nicodemus, the secret disciple of Jesus, he never made a public declaration of his private faith – which the orthodox would have deemed extremely radical. He hid his faith so well that scholars are still unravelling his personal beliefs.¹ His one-time follower William Whiston attributed his policy of silence to simple, human fear and there must be some truth in this. Every day as a public figure (Lucasian Professor, Warden – then Master – of the Mint, President of the Royal Society) and as the figurehead of British natural philosophy, Newton must have felt the tension of outwardly conforming to the Anglican Church, while inwardly denying much of its faith and practice. He was restricted by heresy laws, religious tests and the formidable opposition of public opinion. Heretics were seen as religiously subversive, socially dangerous and even morally debased. Moreover, the positions he enjoyed were dependent on public manifestations of religious and social orderliness. Sir Isaac had a lot to lose. Yet he knew the scriptural injunctions against hiding one's light under a bushel. Newton the believer was thus faced with the need to develop a *modus vivendi* whereby he could work within legal and social structures,

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¹ Compare the slightly different claim in Richard Westfall, *Never at Rest: a Biography of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge, 1980, 319.

while fulfilling the command to shine in a dark world. This paper recovers and assesses his strategies for reconciling these conflicting dynamics and, in so doing, will shed light on both the nature of Newton's faith and his agenda for natural philosophy.

As this study attempts to reconstruct Newton's private and public religious worlds, it has been necessary to do three things. First, I have demanded more of Newton's manuscripts by expanding the range of theological issues normally considered and re-contextualizing his beliefs against the backdrop of contemporary radical theologies. I also show that the religious ideals expressed in his manuscripts often match his actions. Second, I have made cautious use of the surviving oral tradition, personal written accounts and evidence of rumour-mongering. Much of this material is used here for the first time and its value in fleshing out Newton's religious crises and entanglements will become apparent below. Finally, I have employed a sociology of heresy as an explanatory tool for Newton's actions. Taken together, these dynamics help reveal why Newton in public differed so much from Newton in private. While the vicissitudes of time and the nature of such dealings have rendered Newton's heretical private life obscure and largely invisible, the evidence presented in this paper will allow us to draw back the curtain a little further on the heterodox *conversaciones*, clandestine networks, private manuscripts, coded writing and orthodox simulation that comprised the strategies of a Nicodemite.

While Whiston was incredulous as to why someone with Newton's knowledge of the true faith would not announce it to the world, recent historians have held it unsurprising that Newton should keep quiet in an intolerant age.² At the same time, both Whiston and Newton's biographers agree that the latter's reluctance to preach openly was the result of fear and concern for his position in society. While I do outline the restrictions placed on him, I want to argue that neither of these responses to Newton's dilemma – nor the common explanation of it – are adequate. It is not enough to conclude that Newton held his tongue and did so because he was a heretic living in an age of orthodoxy. While this period was still relatively intolerant, and although Newton had ample reason to be anxious about exposure, freedom was increasing and a growing number of dissenters were crafting ways of speaking out with decreasingly severe repercussions. So too Newton who, I will show, did not keep his heresy to himself.

This paper will also attempt to counter two misleading constructions: the portrayal of Newton as a proto-deist on the one hand, and the mollification of his heresy on the other. I will show that these conflicting approaches have deep roots that can be traced back to Newton's lifetime and are formed by the ignorance or suppression of elements of the evidence. The first interpretation has been presented most recently by Richard Westfall,³ but its central features are not new. Part of the problem with this approach is that Newton has too often been characterized by how his ideas were later used and adapted by the Enlightenment. Viewed through Voltaire's lens, Newton looks a lot like a *philosophe*. But

2 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 653; Gale Christianson, *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and his Times*, New York, 1984, 255; Frank Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, Oxford, 1974, 62–3.

3 R. Westfall, 'Isaac Newton's *Theologiae Gentilis origines philosophicae*', in *The Secular Mind* (ed. W. W. Wagar), New York, 1982, 15–34. James E. Force has countered Westfall's presentation of Newton as a proto-deist in 'Newton and deism', in *Science and Religion/Wissenschaft und Religion* (ed. Anne Bäumer and Manfred Büttner), Bochum, 1989, 120–32.

if Newton was an Enlightenment man, he was also a fundamentalist, as those of this disposition have also represented the great man as one of their own.⁴ The second strategy was first motivated by a desire to save the British saint from the stain of unorthodoxy in an age when such propaganda was of great moment. It is epitomized early on by William Stukeley who, responding to assertions that Newton was a heretic, stated that ‘the Church of England intirely claims him as her son, in faith and in practice’.⁵ It may be possible to excuse Stukeley, who was never given direct access to Newton’s heresy. After viewing the incriminating manuscripts in the mid-nineteenth century, however, David Brewster chose to disbelieve his eyes and argue that in fact Newton was a Trinitarian – only of a different sort.⁶ This trend has lost support of late with the availability of Newton’s theological papers. Nevertheless, Thomas Pfizenmaier has recently attempted to resurrect Brewster’s case.⁷

An important element of my task will be to go beyond these common misreadings, bowdlerizations and hopeful constructions. Because the evidence is compelling and since it helps explain Newton’s desire to conceal his beliefs, I want to move in a third direction. Newton was in fact a greater heretic than previously thought, yet by no means a deist, freethinker or anti-scripturalist. Doctrinal and liturgical heresy do not necessarily go hand in hand with these other radicalisms. Here it is important that we extricate ourselves from the still pervasive rhetoric of the orthodox past. Dissenters saw their own ideas as true and positively corrective of orthodox error, not as deviant or subversive.⁸ At the same time, they also consciously stood apart from those they saw as unbelievers. This process, therefore, will involve defining Newton’s ‘theological middle’. That is to say, Newton was a heretic – but only to the orthodox; he was a theological dissident – but he was also a devoted believer. To him, the majority were astray and only he and the faithful remnant class held to the original truth. In order to make sense of Newton’s faith and actions we must enter this alternative world. We cannot understand Newton’s middle unless we move beyond the contemporary orthodox commonplace that antitrinitarianism was a slippery slope to unbelief. A half century is a long time to cling to a slippery slope.

‘NOT FIT FOR BABES’: NEWTON’S HERESIES

Scholars have generally assumed that Newton was a heretical autodidact. I present evidence in this section that will throw this assumption into doubt. Westfall has suggested that Newton’s study of theology and Church history was motivated by his 1675 ordination

4 R. H. Popkin, ‘Newton and the origins of fundamentalism’, in *The Scientific Enterprise* (ed. Edna Ullmann-Margalit), Dordrecht, 1992, 241–59; idem, ‘Newton and fundamentalism, II’, in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology* (ed. J. E. Force and R. H. Popkin), Dordrecht, 1990, 165–80.

5 William Stukeley, *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton’s Life*, London, 1936, 71.

6 D. Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton*, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1855, ii, 339–41.

7 Thomas Pfizenmaier, ‘Was Isaac Newton an Arian?’, *JHI* (1997), 58, 57–80.

8 Cf. Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries*, Oxford, 1996. See also Scott Mandelbrote’s sophisticated study of Newton’s sense of religious duty, which also treats Newton as a Nonconformist: ‘“A duty of the greatest moment”: Isaac Newton and the writing of biblical criticism’, *BJHS* (1993), 26, 281–302.

deadline,⁹ and this may be the case. Westfall has also said that Newton ‘read himself into advanced heresy’.¹⁰ A dog-eared copy of Christopher Sand’s 1669 *Nucleus historiae ecclesiasticae* in Newton’s library may suggest a more complicated process of inspiration.¹¹ The German Arian’s *Nucleus* was a work of great erudition and was respected by a range of scholars, including the orthodox.¹² Its chief purpose was ‘to reinstate the “Arian” and “Arianizing” currents in the history of Christianity’.¹³ This is exactly the historiographical programme of Newton. Sand also deals with Athanasius and the Homoousians – concerns that reverberate throughout Newton’s writings.¹⁴ We know that Newton had encountered Sand no later than 1690, as he refers to Sand’s 1670 *Interpretationes paradoxae* in his ‘Two notable corruptions’.¹⁵ But this same reference to the *Interpretationes* appears in Newton’s Commonplace Book,¹⁶ which dates substantially from the early to mid-1680s (and likely includes material from the 1670s).¹⁷ Newton also had ready access to Isaac Barrow’s library, which by the latter’s death in 1677 contained copies of both Sand’s *Nucleus* and *Interpretationes*.¹⁸ Mordechai Feingold also points to the possibility that Newton acquired his copy of the *Nucleus* from Barrow’s library in 1677.¹⁹ This closes the window between Newton’s conversion to antitrinitarianism and his first exposure to Sand to a few short years at the most.

Significantly, both books by Sand provide references to the Socinians, a movement on which Sand himself was partly dependent.²⁰ Through a massive publication campaign in the seventeenth century, Socinian literature had spread throughout Europe – including England.²¹ The Socinians (or Polish Brethren) were the most intellectually advanced anti-trinitarian movement of the age; as such, it would be surprising if Newton had not sought

9 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 310.

10 R. Westfall, ‘Newton’s theological manuscripts’, in *Contemporary Newtonian Research* (ed. Z. Bechler), Dordrecht, 1982, 130.

11 John Harrison, *The Library of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge, 1978, item 1444.

12 Lech Szczucki, ‘Socinian historiography in the late seventeenth century’, in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History* (ed. F. F. Church and Timothy George), Leiden, 1979, 293.

13 Szczucki, op. cit. (12), 292.

14 See particularly *liber secundus* of C. Sand’s *Nucleus historiae ecclesiasticae*, Cosmopoli [Amsterdam], 1669. The Homoousians were the main Trinitarian party of the fourth century.

15 Isaac Newton, *The Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton* (ed. H. W. Turnbull et al.), 7 vols., Cambridge, 1959–77, iii, 89.

16 King’s College Library, Cambridge, Keynes MS (hereafter Keynes MS) 2, p. 19. In my transcriptions from these and other manuscripts, deletions are represented by strikeouts and insertions placed within angle brackets. Translations from printed and manuscript Latin sources are my own.

17 Westfall suggested that much of the Commonplace Book dates from the 1670s (op. cit. (10), 142), but several considerations, including references to books published in the early 1680s, point to a slightly later date for the bulk of the material.

18 Mordechai Feingold, ‘Isaac Barrow’s library’, in *Before Newton: The Life and Times of Isaac Barrow* (ed. M. Feingold), Cambridge, 1990, 337–8, 363. Newton was also among those who helped catalogue Barrow’s library after the latter’s death. See Manuel, op. cit. (2), 85.

19 I would like to thank Professor Feingold for confirming that the title of the *Interpretationes* is mistakenly given for the *Nucleus* (Sand, op. cit. (14)) in the list of books Newton may have acquired from Barrow. Feingold, op. cit. (18), 371.

20 Newton’s copy of the *Nucleus* is folded down at page 146, which refers to both Fausto Sozzini and György Enyedi. Trinity College Library (hereafter Trinity College), Cambridge NQ.9.17.

21 See H. J. McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, 1951.

out their writings (that is, in the event that he had not already received his inspiration from them). And seek out their writings he did: Newton owned at least eight Socinian works,²² along with an antitrinitarian title by Socinian-influenced György Enyedi²³ and a copy of the English Socinian-Unitarian *The Faith of the One God*.²⁴ We know that Newton read these works, for several of the surviving copies show signs of dog-earing. A reference to the Socinians in Newton's 'Two notable corruptions' shows that his reading of these authors was well underway by 1690.²⁵ Newton may have first encountered Socinian works in the library of Trinity College.²⁶ Also, along with the two works of Sand, Barrow's library contained a copy of the Socinian *Racovian Catechism*, the English Socinian-Unitarian John Biddle's *Brevis disquisitio* and the anti-Socinian work *Photinianismus* by Josiah Stegmann.²⁷ His friend and theological interlocutor John Locke also owned an extensive collection of Sociniana – undoubtedly one of the richest in England – which would be important for the period of their friendship (from 1689 until Locke's death in 1704).²⁸ Moreover, from the first decade of the eighteenth century, Newton was in close and sustained contact with his London neighbour, intimate friend and fellow heretic Samuel Clarke, who owned one and possibly two sets of the Socinian collected works (*Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum*).²⁹ To give another example, the famous London library of Bishop John Moore, of which Clarke was chief cataloguer, contained almost seventy Socinian titles.³⁰ Therefore, aside from his own books, Newton would have had almost unbroken access to a range of Socinian and Socinian-influenced works from the time of his conversion to antitrinitarianism in the early 1670s until his death in 1727.

Whether from his own library or those of others, the theological contours of contemporary antitrinitarianism are visible throughout Newton's thought. Newton and other seventeenth-century antitrinitarians involved themselves in a sustained endeavour to dismantle the history of the Trinitarian victors and replace it with an account that vindicated the legitimacy of the antitrinitarian faith; Sand's *Nucleus* is a classic in this tradition. In particular, both Newton and the Socinians believed primitive Christianity was simple and

22 Harrison, op. cit. (11), items 421, 458, 459, 495, 496, 985, 1385, 1534.

23 Harrison, op. cit. (11), item 557.

24 Harrison, op. cit. (11), item 604.

25 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 84.

26 See Trinity's manuscript library catalogues for 1675/6 (Hyde Catalogue, items 1220, 2565, 2570, 2575, 2705, 2710, 2715, 2720, 3865, 3870) and the 1670s–1690s (MS.Add.a.104, ff. 3v, 7r, 21r, 22r, 22v, 25r and 41v). No items by Sand appear in either of these catalogues. For evidence that Newton was familiar with the holdings of the Trinity College library (then conveniently housed immediately above his lodgings), see Keynes MS 2, f. iiv.

27 Feingold, op. cit. (18), 344, 361, 365. Barrow himself was firmly opposed to Socinianism. John Gascoigne, 'Isaac Barrow's academic milieu: Interregnum and Restoration Cambridge', in Feingold op. cit. (18), 26.

28 In full, there are forty-two separate titles. See Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke*, Oxford, 1971, items 331, 723, 876, 877, 878, 879, 880, 881, 882, 883, 883a, 884, 1062, 1960, 1377, 1378, 2508, 2509, 2574, 2575, 2576, 2577, 2683, 2693, 2694, 2695, 2696, 2697, 2704, 2705, 2706, 2707, 2708, 2709, 2710, 2711, 2712, 3009, 3103, 3104, 3170, 3174. Locke also owned four titles by Sand (2549, 2550, 2551, 2748) and one by Enyedi (1052). On Locke's engagement with Socinianism, see John Marshall, 'Locke and Socinianism', forthcoming.

29 See S. Snobelen, 'The library of Samuel Clarke', *Enlightenment and Dissent* (1997), 16, 187–8, 193, 197.

30 Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL) MS Oo.7.49, ff. 40r, 60r, 198v, 199r, 215r; Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Add. D.81, ff. 95v, 376r, 387v, 408r, 409r–409v, 414v, 443v, 454v, 455v; Bodleian MS Add. D.81*, ff. 108v, 266r. A hint of Newton's relationship with Moore can be seen in Newton, op. cit. (15), v, 413–14.

derived solely from a right reading of Scripture. This pure faith, however, was corrupted through the obtrusion of Greek philosophy, metaphysics and the credal tradition – the prophesied apostasy.³¹ All unscriptural, post-credal and philosophically articulated dogma was thus suspect.³² Both Newton and the Socinians desired to recover the primitive truth of Christianity.³³ Socinians, like Newton, argued that corruptions of language and *novitas verborum* were the primary causes of Church division.³⁴ In Socinian historiography, as with Newton, the invention of the novel term *homoousia* is seen as an evil blight on the Church.³⁵ Moreover, in a manner hauntingly similar to Newton, Socinians argued that primitive doctrine was preserved by a remnant, and that only a chosen few can ‘discover the supreme good, which is divine truth; the masses, on the other hand... will never choose “the best things.”’³⁶ Newton also engaged in antitrinitarian textual criticism. Sand’s *Interpretationes* is directed to the same end. The Socinians, too, were adept textual critics and early on had recognized that such passages as the *comma Johanneum* (1 John 5: 7) were interpolations.³⁷ The Socinians used this discipline to remove apparent scriptural contradictions in order to uphold the Word of God,³⁸ and a major element of this involved expunging putative Trinitarian corruptions. This motivation, too, is seen in Newton’s ‘Two notable corruptions’,³⁹ even if it is difficult to determine if Newton was inspired by Socinian textual criticism, or drawn to it.

Some of the most remarkable parallels are between the Christology of Newton and the Socinians. The Polish Brethren and Newton held that only the Father is truly and uniquely God, using the same proof texts, including the pivotal antitrinitarian *locus classicus* 1 Corinthians 8: 4–6.⁴⁰ Newton and the Socinians asserted that the unity of the Father and the Son is moral, not metaphysical and substantial.⁴¹ Newton’s presentation of the Father

31 Fondation Martin Bodmer, MS, Geneva; Jewish and National University Library, Yahuda MS 15; Stanislaw Lubieniecki, *History of the Polish Reformation* (tr. George H. Williams), Minneapolis, 1995, 80–7, 190–3, 199–201, 248–50, 275, 336–7. See also Szczucki, op. cit. (12), 285–300.

32 Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 274–8; Bodmer MS 5, ff. 3r–4r, 9r; MS 5B, f. 9r; MS 8, f. 2r (where no consistent foliation exists in this manuscript, I number folios from the inserted typewritten chapter divisions); Yahuda MS 15.5, ff. 79r, 97r, 154r, 170r.

33 George H. Williams (ed.), *The Polish Brethren*, Missoula, 1980, 560; Bodmer MS.

34 Dariusz Jarmola, ‘The origins and development of believers’: baptism among Polish Brethren in the sixteenth century’, Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990 (DAI 9028238), 60; Bodmer MS 5, ff. 2r–3r; MS 8, f. 2r; Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 154r.

35 Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 248–9; ‘Paradoxical questions concerning the morals and actions of Athanasius’, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California Los Angeles MS (hereafter Clark MS); Keynes MS 10.

36 Szczucki, op. cit. (12), 294. I deal with Newton’s remnant theology below.

37 Johann Crell, *The Two Books of John Crellius Francus, Touching One God the Father*, [London], 1665, 186, 244; *The Racovian Catechism* (tr. Thomas Rees), London, 1818, 39–42; George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 2nd edn., Kirksville, 1992, 645.

38 Compare with Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 17–18, 42.

39 For the full text of the ‘Two notable corruptions’, see Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 83–149.

40 A few representative examples are: Keynes MS 2, f. XIr; Keynes MS 3, pp. 1, 39; Keynes MS 8, f. 1r; Bodmer MS 1, f. 12r; Williams, op. cit. (33), 316, 392, 398; Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 29, 34, 57, 151, 196; Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 163; Crell, op. cit. (37), 13–22, 190, 214, 222.

41 Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 154r; Bodmer MS 5A, f. 8r; Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 132–3.

as a God of dominion is also a Socinian commonplace,⁴² as is his belief that Christ was God by office, not nature.⁴³

The doctrinal parallels also extend beyond Trinitological issues. Both Newton and the Socinians were mortalists who saw the teaching of the immortal soul as an unwarranted corruption of primitive Christianity.⁴⁴ Related to his mortalism, but without an explicit Socinian parallel, Newton came to deny (largely on exegetical grounds) the reality of a personal devil and literal demons – the latter of which he equated with departed spirits, whose existence was a doctrinal impossibility for someone who denied that the soul could exist without the body.⁴⁵ The denial of the eternity of hell's torments was also part of the Socinian system, and rumoured to be part of Newton's as well.⁴⁶ Moreover, Newton and the Socinians accepted believers' baptism, holding that baptism can take place only after faith and a process of catechizing.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Newton and the Socinians were committed irenicists and advocates of religious toleration.⁴⁸ Finally, the Socinians were ardent supporters of the separation of Church and state,⁴⁹ and Newton appears to have moved in this direction as well.⁵⁰ This is not to say that Newton was a Socinian. Newton, like the Arians, believed in the pre-existence of Christ.⁵¹ Socinians did not. Nevertheless, when Newton is not dealing directly with Christ's pre-existence, his characterizations of God and Christ are virtually indistinguishable from those of Socinianism. Nor did Newton believe that the Socinians – that is, those who denied Christ's pre-existence – were heretics.⁵² This expanded hermeneutical profile of Newton's Christology, therefore, suggests a mix of Arian and Socinian elements.⁵³

This exercise has moved Newton's theology further away from orthodoxy than Arianism – the traditional designation for his Christology. Thomas Pfizenmaier has recently

42 See Bodmer MS 1, ff. 11r–12r; Bodmer MS 5A, ff. 8r–9r; Williams, op. cit. (33), 391–4; Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 25; Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 163; see also James E. Force, 'Newton's God of dominion: the unity of Newton's theological, scientific, and political thought', in Force and Popkin, op. cit. (4), 75–102.

43 Keynes MS 3, p. 45r; Bodmer MS 5A, f. 8r–9r; Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 55.

44 Clark MS, ff. 54r–55r; Yahuda MS 7.2e, f. 4v; Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 336, 339; James E. Force, 'The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)', in *The Books of Nature and Scripture* (ed. J. E. Force and R. H. Popkin), Dordrecht, 1994, 179–200; Williams, op. cit. (33), 112–22, 363–5.

45 See for example Yahuda MS 9.2, ff. 19v–21v.

46 Williams, op. cit. (37), 105, 115, 119–20, 364; cf. Rees (tr.), op. cit. (37), 367; W. Whiston, *Historical Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Samuel Clarke*, London, 1730, 98, and *The Eternity of Hell Torments Considered*, London, 1740, 49; cf. Keynes MS 9, ff. 1r, Ar, Br, 13r.

47 There are many examples of this in Newton's writings; including Keynes MS 3, pp. 1, 3, 9–11, 23, 31, 43, 44; Keynes MS 6, f. 1r; Bodmer MS 2, ff. 20–22, 26, 34; Newton, op. cit. (15), iv, 405. On Newton's views, see also W. Whiston, *A Collection of Authentick Records Belonging to the Old and New Testament*, 2 vols., London, 1728, ii, 1074–5, and *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Whiston*, 2 vols., London, 1753, i, 178. For the Socinians, see Williams, op. cit. (33), 21–2, 446–57, 624–5; Rees (tr.), op. cit. 37, 249–62; Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 373–6.

48 Keynes MS 3; Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 154r; Yahuda MS 39. Compare with Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *The Life of Sir Isaac Newton* (the *Éloge*), London, 1728, 28; Williams, op. cit. (37), 291–302, 342–54, 559–81.

49 Williams, op. cit. (37), 1282–4.

50 Keynes MS 6, f. 1r; Yahuda MS 39.

51 Cf. Keynes MS 3, p. 45r, Yahuda MS 15 and Bodmer MS.

52 Bodmer MS 5A, ff. 5r, 8r (cf. f. 1r); cf. Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 96r.

53 See also Wiles, op. cit. (8), 83–4.

attempted to do the opposite, claiming that Newton later in life moved from Arianism towards orthodoxy and was thus in the end not a heretic.⁵⁴ Pfizenmaier rests his argument largely on one of Newton's Mint papers (which he cites through Manuel), which *may* show that Newton accepted the orthodox tenet of the eternity of the Son at some point of his London period.⁵⁵ But this is a precarious enterprise. It is likely that Newton's theology went through minor adjustments and, after all, the Mint paper can only be dated to after 1696. However, a post-1710 manuscript twice demonstrates in unambiguous fashion that Newton believed the eternal generation was not taught until the fourth century, assigning its diffusion in the Church to his favourite corrupters Athanasius and the monks.⁵⁶ It is doubtful that Newton's opinion, based on decades of historical work, changed substantially so late in life.⁵⁷ Nor, as we have seen, does Newton's heresy hinge on a single element of his Christology or even on Trinitological issues alone. For, in addition to denial of the Holy Trinity, he also rejected the immortal soul and evil spirits. It is hard to imagine a more heretical combination than these three. Although the latter two beliefs were also rooted in his biblicism, they would have been viewed as tantamount to atheism.⁵⁸ Measured against orthodoxy, Newton was a damnable heretic.

Further scholarship will have to determine whether it is only a coincidence that within four to five years of the appearance of Sand's *Nucleus* in 1669, Newton began interpreting the Bible and Church history in a manner indistinguishable from Sand. But the books only tell part of the story. While the books may have led him to seek out contemporary antitrinitarians, we must not neglect the possibility that it was the other way around. Newton may have been introduced to such works and ideas through contact with crypto-Socinians or Unitarians; as I show below, he was certainly networking with such in later decades. The oral communication of teachings may rarely survive in the written record, but its importance as a mode for the dissemination of ideas must not be underestimated; Newton himself operated in this way, as we shall see. From the 1670s onward, the tone and nature of Newton's antitrinitarianism bears a remarkable resemblance to the early arguments of the Socinian-influenced English Unitarians – arguments eventually codified in several publications of the late 1680s and 1690s.⁵⁹ For example, a report deriving from Newton's Cambridge period has him believing that God had sent Muhammad to reveal the One God to Arabs,⁶⁰ which echoes the Unitarian *historia monotheistica* of the 1670s–1710s.⁶¹ Further, Newton's friend Hopton Haynes claimed that Newton had told him that

54 Pfizenmaier, op. cit. (7), 80.

55 Pfizenmaier, op. cit. (7), 69; Manuel, op. cit. (2), 71–2.

56 Yahuda MS 15.5, ff. 177v, 183r–v. Pfizenmaier does not cite these examples.

57 My own analysis of Newton's theology includes post-1710 manuscripts.

58 Thomas Hobbes and Balthassar Bekker, who also denied evil spirits, were much calumniated for their views. On the perceived radicalism of this position, see John Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism*, London, 1695, 100–1, who sees it as an open door to atheism, and J. Hunter (ed.), *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby*, 2 vols., London, 1830, ii, 159.

59 See especially [Stephen Nye], *A Brief History of the Unitarians called also Socinians*, London, 1687 and Anonymous, *The Faith of the One God*, London, 1691.

60 This report is cited in German in J. Edleston, *Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton and Professor Cotes*, London, 1850, p. lxxx.

61 On which, see Justin Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*, Cambridge, 1992, 99–132.

‘the time will come, when the doctrine of the incarnation shall be exploded as an absurdity equal to transubstantiation’.⁶² This, too, was a commonplace of Unitarian polemics.⁶³ Even with the remaining uncertainties, these echoes of Unitarian rhetoric, combined with evidence of appropriation from Sand and the Socinians, help locate much of Newton’s theology and demonstrate his associations with a greater heresy.⁶⁴

NEWTON CONTRA MUNDUM: MINORITY FAITH AND THE REMNANT CLASS

As a minority believer, Newton needed to justify his rejection of the majority faith. One confirmation came through his alternative ecclesiastical history, outlined above. Newton turned the epigram *Athanasius contra mundum* on its head; in the reverse world he constructed, it was Newton against the world. Newton’s irenicism provided another support. Like the Erasmian distinction between *fundamenta* and *adiaphora*, but based more immediately on Hebrews 5, Newton believed that only the ‘milk’ of simple truth was required for baptism and communion, and that only the mature could attain to the ‘strong meats’ of the deeper things in theology.⁶⁵ ‘strong meats’, wrote Newton, ‘are not fit for babes’.⁶⁶ These ‘strong meats’ for elders included such matters as disputes over Trinitarian dogma.⁶⁷ Newton believed that ‘if the strong impose their opinions as conditions of communion they preach another gospel & become schismatics’.⁶⁸ So Newton did not disturb the Church with his ‘strong meats’, revealing them only to a select group of ‘strong men’. Moreover, Newton also stated that ‘if any man contend for any other sort of worship which he cannot prove to have been practised in the Apostles days, he may use it in his Closet without troubling the Churches with his private sentiments’.⁶⁹ Newton knew many of his beliefs were contentious and in dispute, so it seems likely that his irenic stance also helped confine his theology to the private sphere.

Newton’s writings also exhibit powerful expressions of remnant theology. He believed that although God revealed the truth through prophecies, these are nevertheless not intended ‘to convert y^e whole to y^e truth’.⁷⁰ Rather, the design of prophecy ‘is to try men & convert the best’.⁷¹ ‘Tis enough’, Newton believed, that prophecy ‘is able to move y^e assent of those w^{ch} he hath chosen; & for y^e rest who are so incredulous, it is just that they should be permitted to dy in their sins.’ What Newton claimed for prophecy, he also

62 Richard Baron, Preface, *Cordial For Low Spirits*, 3 vols., London, 1763, i, pp. xviii–xix.

63 Cf. Champion, op. cit. (61), 109–10.

64 Jean-François Baillon speaks of Newton’s involvement in a ‘réseau unitarien-socinien clandestin’ in ‘Newtonisme et idéologie dans l’Angleterre des Lumières’, Thèse de doctorat de Lettres, Sorbonne, 1995, 215.

65 Keynes MS 3, pp. 1, 3, 11, 31, 32, 34, 39, 41, 43, 44, 51; Bodmer MS 3, f. 2r.

66 Keynes MS 3, p. 3.

67 Keynes MS 3, p. 51.

68 Keynes MS 3, p. 44.

69 Keynes MS 3, p. 1 (see also pp. 13, 31, 32 (bis)). Compare with the similar directive Newton recorded about the practice of alchemy: ‘This may be done in your chamber as privately as you will, & it is a great secret.’ Keynes MS 33, f. 6r.

70 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 17r.

71 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 18r.

asserted for the entire Bible, writing that God ‘hath so framed y^e Scriptures as to discern between y^e good and y^e bad, that they should be demonstration to y^e one & foolishness to y^e other’. The nature of Newton’s remnant theology is made explicit a few sentences later, when he speaks of the ‘great odds’ of chancing to be on ‘y^e right side’.⁷² In Newton’s calculus of doctrine, the greater the number of assenters, the greater the likelihood of error. He thus warned against relying on ‘the judgment of y^e multitude, for so thou shalt certainly be deceived. But search the scriptures thy self’.⁷³ Newton, who knew firsthand the psychological dynamics of leaving the faith of one’s fathers, points out that although there are ‘so many religions’, only one can be true, and argues that it might be ‘none of those that thou art acquainted with’.⁷⁴ He also cautions that ‘they will call thee it may be a ~~hot-headed fellow~~ a Bigot, a Fanatique, a Heretique’. A member of the remnant class must disregard such labelling and remember that ‘y^e world loves to be deceived’ and ‘are wholly led by prejudice, interest, the prais of men, & authority of y^e Church they live in: as is plain becaus all parties keep close to y^e Religion they have been brought up in’.⁷⁵ For Newton, the way was narrow and only a precious few would find it.⁷⁶

What is more, Newton believed the orthodox would be stubbornly unresponsive to being exposed as heretics. In a passage dealing with the persecuting power of the fourth-century Trinitarians – likely also a gloss on his own day – he wrote:

But I know they who stand accused hereby will <still> contend they are y^e Orthodox Church & y^e Barbarians hereticks... To convince these men of their Heresies would be a vain attempt, it being y^e nature of hereticks to be inconsiderate & therefore confident & obstinate.⁷⁷

Here we must remember that for Newton orthodoxy is heresy and heresy truth. He did not believe that ‘all that call themselves Christians’ would understand, but that only ‘a remnant, a few scattered persons which God hath chosen ... as Daniel hath said that y^e wise shall understand, so he hath said also that none of y^e wicked shall understand’.⁷⁸ Open preaching would be pointless.⁷⁹

Finally, it is manifest that Newton did not like disputes. This is famously true in the case of his natural philosophy. Nor is it particularly surprising: most of his significant publications from his 1672 paper on colours to the pirated 1725 *Abrégé* brought controversy. Thus Newton told William Derham that he ‘abhorred all Contests,

72 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 19r.

73 Yahuda MS 1.1a, ff. 1r–2r.

74 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 3r.

75 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 5r.

76 Newton’s conception of the remnant likely owes something not only to certain prescriptive biblical texts and his rationalization of his minority faith, but also to the notion of the alchemical adept in possession of lost and privileged truths. See Mary S. Churchill, ‘The Seven Chapters, with explanatory notes’, *Chymia* (1967), 12, 38–9; Mandelbrote, op. cit. (8), 299. On associations between Newton’s heretical theology and his interest in alchemy, see Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius: The Role of Alchemy in Newton’s Thought*, Cambridge, 1991.

77 Yahuda MS 1.4, ff. 67r–68r.

78 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 1r.

79 See Lawrence Principe’s discussion of Newton’s aversion to openness in his alchemical pursuits: L. Principe, ‘The alchemies of Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton: alternative approaches and divergent deployments’, in *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (ed. M. J. Osler), Cambridge, 2000, 201–220.

accounting Peace a substantial Good. And for this reason, namely to avoid being baited by little Smatterers in Mathematicks... he designedly made his Principia abstruse; but <yet so as> to be understood by able Mathematicians'.⁸⁰ Similar dynamics applied in his theology.⁸¹ John Craig claimed Newton would not publish his religious writings 'in his own time, because they show'd that his thoughts were some times different from those which are commonly receiv'd, which would ingage him in disputes, & this was a thing which he avoided as much as possible'.⁸² By restricting his theology to himself and an inner group, he retained control of it and avoided disputes. As we shall see, his theology was only presented in public after being rendered obscure. Here the philosophical notion of the adept blends with the theology of the remnant.⁸³ Newton was not about to cast his pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to rend him.

'THE WISE WILL UNDERSTAND': NEWTON, PROPHECY AND THE SECOND REFORMATION

Newton's theological papers reveal that he both desired a further reformation and thought it providentially inevitable. Yet, although he had power to influence, he never made any open attempts at reform.⁸⁴ According to Haynes, it was fear of persecution and pressures from orthodoxy that stilled Newton's tongue, weakened his zeal and prevented him from leading this return to primitive Christianity.⁸⁵ Yet we have just seen how Newton's remnant theology and distaste of disputes would have limited his evangelization. Another limitation derives from his interpretation of prophecy. A firm believer in biblical prophecy, Newton read history with Daniel and Revelation at his side and with them forecast the end of the age. However, while his antitrinitarian reading of prophecy had implications for the present, including the contemporary Church, he did not commentate apocalyptically on events of his own day. Past history was profoundly shaped by the Most High, the future would be charged with providential signs, but the present is devoid of prophetic activity. For Newton, there would be no Apocalypse now. His prophetic chronologies confirm this apocalyptic quiescence toward the present. Although reluctant to set dates, when he did the Millennium was put off to no sooner than the twentieth century.⁸⁶ This was in direct contrast to then common views that the end would occur in the eighteenth century. In one manuscript he set the end 'in the year of Lord [*sic*] 2060', adding:

80 Keynes MS 133, p. 10. Rob Iliffe deals with Newton's obfuscation of the *Principia* in his "'Per this, and per that": understanding and the authorship of the *Principia*', unpublished typescript, 1997.

81 Cf. Keynes MS 3, pp. 3, 13.

82 Keynes MS 132, f. 2r.

83 On Newton's conviction that he was a privileged member of the *prisca theologi* in possession of the lost *prisca sapientia* (which included theology and natural philosophy) see J. E. McGuire and P. M. Rattansi, 'Newton and the pipes of Pan', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* (1966), 21, 108–43.

84 Compare with the Scottish clergyman Robert Wodrow's concern that heretical ideas from such a man as Newton would be 'sualloved down by multitudes'. R. Wodrow, *Analecta*, 4 vols., Edinburgh, 1842–3, iii, 462.

85 H. Haynes, *Causa Dei contra Novatores: or the Religion of the Bible and the Religion of the Pulpit Compared*, London, 1747, 30, 57.

86 See Keynes MS 5, f. 138v.

I mention this period not to assert it, but only to shew that there is little reason to expect it earlier, & thereby to put a stop to the rash conjectures of Interpreters who are frequently assigning the time of the end, & thereby bringing the sacred Prophecies into discredit as often as their conjectures do not come to pass. It is not for us to know the times & seasons w^{ch} God hath put in his own breast.⁸⁷

Not only did Newton place the end well beyond his own lifetime, but as he grew older he pushed the date back further yet. He shifted the date for the onset of the 1260-year apostasy from 607 in the 1670s, to increasingly later dates that suggested the end would come in the twenty-third or twenty-fourth century.⁸⁸

The apostasy was prophetically ordained to last for 1260 years, a period of history he believed would be ‘of all times the most wicked’.⁸⁹ Newton believed the preaching of the everlasting Gospel to every nation and ‘y^e establishment of <true religion>’ would occur only at or after the fall of Babylon.⁹⁰ In its broadest sense, the apostasy was to last from the time of the Apostles until the Second Coming of Christ.⁹¹ In what Protestant exegetes would have viewed as a shocking decentring of the Reformation, he wrote that the ‘purity of religion’ had ‘ever since decreased’ from the Apostle’s time, and would continue to ‘decrease more & more to y^e end’⁹² and that because ‘the Gentiles have corrupted themselves we may expect that God in due time will make a new reformation’.⁹³ Indeed, Whiston relates that Newton had ‘a very sagacious Conjecture’ that the apostasy ‘must be put a stop to, and broken to Pieces by the prevalence of Infidelity, for some time, before Primitive Christianity could be restored’.⁹⁴ Only after this ‘greatest decay of religion’ would there be ‘an universal preaching of the Gospel’. In case there could be any doubt as to the timing of this great event, Newton went on to affirm that ‘this is not yet fulfilled; there has been nothing done in y^e world like it, & therefore it is to come’.⁹⁵ No contemporary effort at reformation could pre-empt this plan any more than one could fight against God. Furthermore, the message would fall on deaf ears.⁹⁶ A long period of corruption lay ahead.

Frustrated that Newton had not lent his great name to the cause of Primitive Christianity, after Newton’s death Whiston dropped a bombshell. He surmised that Newton’s prophetic notion of ‘a long future corrupt State of the Church’ might be a discouragement to Newton’s ‘making publick efforts for the Restoration of Primitive Christianity’, just as Whiston’s own ‘Expectation of the near approach of the Conclusion of the corrupt State’, and by consequence the time when Primitive Christianity was to be restored, greatly encouraged him ‘to labour for its Restoration’.⁹⁷ For Newton the growth

87 Yahuda MS 7.3g, f. 13r; cf. MS 7.3i, f. 54r.

88 Westfall, op. cit. (10), 132, 135–6, 139; Westfall, op. cit. (1), 325.

89 Yahuda MS 1.2, f. 62r.

90 Yahuda MS 1.3, f. 53r; cf. MS 9, f. 158r.

91 Bodmer MS 4A, f. 2r.

92 Yahuda MS 1.4, f. 1r.

93 Keynes MS 3, p. 35.

94 W. Whiston, *An Essay on the Revelation of St. John*, London, 1744, 321.

95 Yahuda MS 1.4, f. 2r (cf. f. 1r).

96 Cf. I. Newton, *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John*, London, 1733, 250.

97 Whiston, *Clarke*, op. cit. (46), 157; cf. Westfall, op. cit. (1), 815–16.

of infidelity made open evangelization temporarily futile. Although anxiety over the possibility of exposure must have been a factor, what Whiston and Haynes interpreted straightforwardly as fear and want of zeal was a more complicated stance. It was not lack of faith; it was a strategy based on belief. Newton did not expect the imminent return of Christ. Instead, he sequestered himself and lived through the dark and evil days in virtual silence. He waited while God waited, and the continuing infidelity of his age was a sign that the end was not nigh. It was not a time for prophetic boldness.⁹⁸

'FOR FEAR OF THE JEWS': LEGAL STRUCTURES AND SOCIAL DANGER

Newton lived in an age when heresy was not only a religious crime, but also a civil offence and a social outrage. When he converted to antitrinitarianism at Cambridge, he opposed a triad of legal structures: civil, ecclesiastical and academic. These restrictions have never been presented *in toto* as a backdrop to Newton's actions, yet because the artifices of Nicodemism were in large part responses to such restrictions, these structures are crucial to an understanding of his strategies and manoeuvres. First, throughout most of Newton's youth, the 1648 'Ordinance for the punishing of blasphemies and heresies' was in force. This law prohibited, *inter alia*, the denial of the Trinity or any Person thereof; those who did not abjure this error, would 'suffer the pains of death...without benefit of Clergy'. Imprisonment was mandated for lesser crimes, including mortalism and anti-paedobaptism (both of which, as we have seen, are apparent in Newton's mature theology). The 1689 Toleration Act gave some relief to Protestant dissenters, but specifically excluded Roman Catholics and antitrinitarians. Further measures against antitrinitarianism were taken with the 1698 'Act for the more effectual suppressing of blasphemy and profaneness'. Enacted in the wake of the Trinitarian controversies, this Act ordered that anyone who 'by Writings, Printing, Teaching, or advised Speaking, deny any one of the Persons in the Holy Trinity to be God', should on the first offence be deprived of legal rights and any ecclesiastical, civil or military office. The second offence brought three year's incarceration. This law was not repealed until 1813.⁹⁹

As for the orthodox standard of the Thirty-nine Articles, Newton denied at least five Articles in full or in part, including the central Articles relating to the Trinity (I, II, V, VIII, XXVII).¹⁰⁰ He may have deviated from aspects of up to five others as well (XX, XXI, XXXVIII, XXXVI, XXXVII).¹⁰¹ But the Thirty-nine Articles were not a fully comprehensive measure of

98 See also S. Snobelen, 'Caution, conscience and the Newtonian reformation: the public and private heresies of Newton, Clarke and Whiston', *Enlightenment and Dissent* (1997), 16, 151–84, which includes earlier and briefer presentations of some of the arguments made in this paper.

99 Robert Florida, 'British law and Socinianism in the 17th and 18th centuries', in *Socinianism and its Role in the Culture of XVI-th to XVIII-th centuries* (ed. L. Szczucki), Warsaw, 1983, 206–10.

100 Articles on the Trinity, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the three Creeds and baptism. On the theological intent of the Thirty-nine Articles, see E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, London, 1955.

101 Articles on the authority of the Church, the authority of Councils, the Eucharist, ordination and civil magistrates.

heresy in the Church of England. Newton's mortalism, for example, does not explicitly contradict any Article, yet would have been viewed as dangerous and heretical. The same can be said for his antitrinitarian view of Church history and rejection of evil spirits. Of the three Creeds (Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian), Newton deviated from significant parts of the second (by denying that Christ was 'very God') and from virtually the entire text of the third (by denying the co-equality and consubstantiality of the three Persons of the Trinity). What is more, the Athanasian Creed anathematized and damned those who denied its formulations.

The University of Cambridge established its own restrictions. In order to accept his BA and MA degrees, Newton subscribed to the Prayerbook and the Thirty-nine Articles in 1665 and 1668.¹⁰² When he became a minor Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1667, he took the oath imposed by the 1662 Act of Uniformity, by which he swore to 'conform to the Liturgy of the Church of England'.¹⁰³ When he became a major Fellow in 1668, he swore 'to embrace the true religion of Christ with all his soul' – that is, the Anglican Church.¹⁰⁴ Finally, when he became Lucasian Professor of the University in 1669 he again subscribed to the 1662 Act,¹⁰⁵ and in signing the statute for the Lucasian Professorship, also committed himself to a morality clause that demanded virtue (*honestas*) and orderliness (*modestia*) and prohibited serious crimes, including heresy and schism, along with treason, murder, grand larceny, adultery, fornication and perjury.¹⁰⁶ In addition to these subscriptions, Statute XLV (*De Concionibus*) of the University's Elizabethan Statutes of 1570 contains several pertinent clauses relating to heresy, and prohibits public teaching, acting or defending against the Church within the University on pain of perpetual banishment from that institution.¹⁰⁷

As harsh as these restrictions appear, there was disparity between the severity of the laws and the leniency of their enforcement. The harshest of them, the 1648 Ordinance, was repealed with the Restoration. Even while in force, the only person prosecuted under it was the Unitarian John Biddle, who was not put to death, but in the first instance exiled for three years.¹⁰⁸ As for the 1698 Act, it, too, was rarely invoked. There is only a single known charge (in 1726), and even then the case was thrown out on technical grounds and the accused, who had written an antitrinitarian pamphlet, was never indicted again, although he neither recanted nor concealed his views.¹⁰⁹

Newton may have been more mindful of actual prosecutions. We now know in retrospect that they were the last antitrinitarians to be burnt at the stake, but the cases of Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman, who perished in 1612 at Smithfield and Lichfield, were notorious. Although a reprieve was obtained, the English Socinian Paul Best

102 CUL Subscriptiones ii, ff. 163, 243; Subscr. Add. 3.

103 CUL Subscr. Add. 2, f. 16.

104 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 331.

105 CUL Subscr. Add. 2, f. 25.

106 CUL O.XIV.254.

107 *Statuta Academiae Cantabrigiensis*, Cambridge, 1785, 254–5. It was under this clause that Whiston was charged and expelled in 1710 while Lucasian Professor. W. Whiston, *An Account of Mr. Whiston's Prosecution at, and Banishment from, the University of Cambridge*, London, 1718, 26.

108 Florida, op. cit. (99), 201.

109 Florida, op. cit. (99), 202.

was sentenced to hang in 1646. Former Oxford scholar Biddle died in prison in 1662 while Newton was an undergraduate. Other Nonconformists suffered as well. In 1663 a Fellow of Clare Hall (now Clare College) was charged after preaching privately in Cambridge and ‘sentenced to abjure the realm in three months or to suffer death as a felon’. Although a reprieve was obtained, he remained in Cambridge Castle until 1672. When he again took up preaching on his release, he was once more remanded into custody, where he spent further time in Fleet Prison.¹¹⁰ In 1668 Daniel Scargill was expelled from Cambridge for ‘asserting impious and atheistic tenets’ and was reinstated only after a public recantation at Great St Mary’s Church.¹¹¹ Arthur Bury’s *Naked Gospel* (1690) brought the author a £500 fine, a public burning of the book and excommunication. William Freke’s *Brief and Clear Confutation of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1693) brought a fine, a public burning of the book and a forced recantation. The infamous 1697 hanging of Thomas Aikenhead in Scotland for various blasphemies, including denial of the Trinity, reminded radical dissenters of their precarious situation.¹¹² In Dublin, Thomas Emlyn was fined £1000 and jailed in 1703 for antitrinitarianism.¹¹³

The examples of Newton’s disciples Whiston and Clarke in the early 1710s would have hit closest to home. Whiston’s proclamation of antitrinitarianism cost him his professorship and any further hope of public office. Clarke’s heterodox *Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712) brought on him the compulsion to make peace with the Church and prevented further ecclesiastical preferment. Still, neither man was jailed or fined – let alone defrocked. Whiston went on to obtain patronage from the nobility, while Clarke retained his rectorship at St James’s in London. Nor were they without support from Whigs and the low Church. Nevertheless, these outcomes were not predictable and for the rest of their lives the two faced a steady stream of innuendo, accusations of heresy and polemical tracts.¹¹⁴

This survey reveals a number of diachronic and practical issues. First, by the early eighteenth century the fires of Smithfield had long since gone out. There were no convictions during the last two decades of Newton’s life and for some time before then had been reserved only for the more extreme cases. The chief intent of the heresy laws was to discipline religion in the public sphere and as such they were only enforceable when heretics publicized their views. Mere rumours and accusations carried no weight in law. Newton and other Nicodemite heretics could avoid prosecution by confining their activities to the private domain. Being a heretic in one’s heart was one thing; shouting blasphemy from the rooftops was another matter altogether. By Newton’s London period the social repercussions and career implications of public heresy figured larger than the iron fist of

110 C. H. Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, 4 vols., Cambridge, 1842–52, iii, 512.

111 Cooper, op. cit. (110), iii, 532; James L. Axtell, ‘The mechanics of opposition: Restoration Cambridge v. Daniel Scargill’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* (1965), 38, 102–11.

112 Michael Hunter, ‘“Aikenhead the atheist”: the context and consequences of articulate irreligion in the late seventeenth century’, in *Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain* (ed. M. Hunter), Woodbridge, 1995, 308–32; Champion, op. cit. (61), 107.

113 The fine, however, was eventually reduced and he was released in 1705; on returning to England Emlyn published further antitrinitarian works without legal hindrance. Florida, op. cit. (99), 202.

114 James Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian*, Cambridge, 1985 and J. P. Ferguson, *An Eighteenth-Century Heretic: Dr. Samuel Clarke*, Kington, 1976.

the law. However, while socially the confirmed epithet ‘heretic’ could have hung like a millstone around Newton’s neck, he was also shielded by status and powerful allies. By the height of his London period there was simply too much invested in Newton. His exposure certainly would have created a scandal – but it would have been an agonizing one. The President of the Royal Society and his *Principia* were international propaganda tools of inestimable value. Whiston was expendable; the establishment could not afford to sacrifice Sir Isaac. Nevertheless, Newton never gave them cause to ponder the dilemma of his heresy.

BOWING THE KNEE IN THE HOUSE OF RIMMON: STRATEGIES OF CONCEALMENT

After becoming a heretic in the early 1670s, Newton faced a crisis of conscience: subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles and become ordained in an apostate Church by 1675 or give up his Fellowship. There is evidence that Newton attempted to secure an exempt Law Fellowship in February 1673.¹¹⁵ Westfall finds this plausible and uses it as a *terminus ad quem* for Newton’s conversion to antitrinitarianism. After this attempt failed, Newton chose principle and had been prepared to resign his Fellowship when a last-minute reprieve came from Charles II, allowing him to stay at Cambridge without taking orders.¹¹⁶ Newton had become a Nicodemite.

In this section I use a reconstruction of Newton’s Nicodemism to evaluate his public religious manoeuvres.¹¹⁷ At the heart of Nicodemism are what I call ‘strategies of concealment’. Concealment took two forms: simulating conformity and dissimulating (or dissembling) non-conformity. To use a contemporary articulation by Richard Steele, ‘Simulation is a Pretence of what is not, and Dissimulation a Concealment of what is.’¹¹⁸ For roughly fifty-five years, Newton simulated orthodox Anglicanism and dissimulated heresy. The Latin term *Nicodemites* was first used by Calvin to characterize crypto-Protestants in Catholic territories who conformed publicly to the idolatry of Rome¹¹⁹ – a situation not unlike Newton’s own. A decades-long tradition of crypto-Socinianism had existed among the diaspora of Polish Brethren in the Low Countries and there were crypto-Socinians in England as well. At some point, Newton, whose friend Locke was himself a crypto-Socinian of sorts,¹²⁰ would have become aware of such underground networks and Nicodemite strategies.

By Newton’s day, a repertoire of scriptural texts had been assembled to justify simulation and dissimulation.¹²¹ The most notable case was the eponym of Nicodemism,

115 *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1799), 69, 1186.

116 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 331–3; Newton, op. cit. (15), vii, 387. Newton’s willingness to resign provides further corroborating evidence that he had strong disagreements with the Thirty-nine Articles.

117 On Nicodemism, see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, MA, 1990 and Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Nicodemismo: simulazione e dissimulazione nell’Europa dell’500*, Turin, 1970. Zagorin, 327–8, gives Newton and Locke as late examples of Nicodemites.

118 R. Steele, *Tatler* No. 213 (1710).

119 Zagorin, op. cit. (117), 12.

120 John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility*, Cambridge, 1994, 342–50, 415–27.

121 Zagorin, op. cit. (117), 15–37.

the disciple of Jesus who came to him by night (John 3: 2). Joseph of Arimathea, like Nicodemus, was a follower of Jesus, ‘but secretly for fear of the Jews’ (John 19: 38). Old Testament examples could be invoked as well. After being commanded by God to tear down an offending altar of Baal, Gideon carried out his duty at night, ‘because he feared his father’s household, and the men of the city’ (Judges 6: 27). After converting to the God of Israel, Naaman the Syrian pleaded with Elisha for permission to continue to bow his knee in the house of Rimmon while attending the worship of this pagan idol (2 Kings 5). The prophet’s response (‘go in peace’) was taken as a divine imprimatur of simulation. That this last example was still in currency in the eighteenth century is shown by its use against Whiston for ‘frequenting the public service of the Church of *England*’.¹²²

Frequent the service of the Church of England Newton certainly did. In Cambridge Newton faithfully attended Sunday service at Great St Mary’s Church – although his weekday attendance at chapel was dilatory enough for his chamber-fellow Humphrey Newton to comment ‘y^t He scarcely <knew> y^e House of Prayer’.¹²³ If any truth can be gleaned from Stukeley’s agenda-driven testimony, there was no such backsliding in his London period. Stukeley noted that the great man ‘could not excuse himself from the weekly solemn adoration of the Supreme Being, both out of principle and a regard to his influence and example; and he was sensible that many persons were attentive to his conduct in that respect’.¹²⁴ Such a policy would be consistent with his desire to appear God-fearing; Newton hated people thinking he was an infidel. A surviving Sacramental Certificate from the Middlesex County Records provides legal proof of Newton’s attendance at communion in the parish church of St James’s on 5 July 1702.¹²⁵ Finally, both his duodecimo bible ‘with service Dirty’, along with the well-worn prayerbook in his octavo bible, provide compelling physical testimony to habitual worship in the idolatrous Church.¹²⁶

Perhaps because he was aware many were attentive to his conduct, Newton made a point of involving himself (or allowing himself to be involved) publicly with the established Church. While serving in Parliament as an MP for Cambridge University in 1689, Newton was appointed to sit on a committee for relieving French Protestant ministers.¹²⁷ For twenty-two years from 1700 Newton was one of nine trustees of the Golden Square

122 Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i. 327.

123 Keynes MS 135; cf. Stukeley, op. cit. (5), 60.

124 Stukeley, op. cit. (5), 69. Newton privately wrote of the religious duty to ‘assemble weekly to worship God jointly by prayers & praises, & in o^m assemblies commemorate the death of Christ by breaking of <bread &> drinking of wine the symbols of his body & blood’, Keynes MS 9, f. 1r; cf. ff. Ar, Br.

125 This document is reproduced as a plate in J. C. Jeaffreson (ed.), *Middlesex County Records*, London, 1975, iv, 350–1. The minister present was William Wake. Newton and John Garner made oaths as witnesses. Since the certificate was intended to attest to a person’s acceptance of Anglican communion when taking a public office (in conformity to the 1685 Test Act), and because in this case the person was Sir John Stanley (who succeeded Newton as Warden of the Mint in December 1699), it is possible that Newton, too, had given similar proof when he succeeded to this same office, despite his aversion to such religious tests. Compare with Newton, CUL MS Add. 4005, f. 15v, where he writes: ‘I do not know a greater abuse of religion then [oaths of office] they being harder to be kept then y^e Jewish law’.

126 Harrison, op. cit. (11), item 189; Trinity College, Adv.d.1.10.

127 Entry for 18 April 1689, *Journals of the House of Commons*, [London, 1742], 10, 93.

Tabernacle, a new chapel set up in his London parish.¹²⁸ His duties involved selecting preachers, as in 1718 when he and six other directors (including Clarke) nominated Arthur Ashley Sykes to the afternoon preachership.¹²⁹ In addition, Newton was appointed to the Commission for building fifty new churches in London and Westminster.¹³⁰ He also became a commissioner for the project of completing St Paul's.¹³¹ By late 1705, the newly knighted Sir Isaac could also be found dining with bishops at Lambeth Palace.¹³² But most stunning of all was Newton's appointment on 15 May 1689 to a parliamentary committee for considering the 'Bill for Liberty and Indulgence to Protestant Dissenters'. This was none other than the 1689 Toleration Act. The committee members, all of whom were to have a voice in the deliberations, were to meet on 16 May 1689.¹³³ When they reported back to Parliament the next day, they included among their recommended additions the requirement that dissenters 'profess Faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ his Eternal Son, the true God, and in the Holy Spirit, One God blessed for evermore'.¹³⁴ What could Newton – by this time a fierce antitrinitarian – do in these pressing circumstances? He dare not raise suspicion by speaking out against the amendment. Perhaps he maintained a cautious silence. Did his implication in the 1689 Act – directed as it was in part against non-trinitarian dissenters like himself – weigh heavy on him and possibly even contribute to the psychological stresses that eventually led to his 1693 breakdown? Or did he justify his involvement by convincing himself of the Hobbesian distinction between publicly legislated doctrine and the faith one could practice quietly in private? It is also possible that he saw the Bill as a positive advance for dissent and a herald of even greater liberties to come. We will never know.¹³⁵ On the other hand, involvement (intentional or otherwise) in an Act that extended no tolerance to heresy would serve as the ultimate cover for a secret heretic. While Newton himself may not have seen these

128 Some accounts of the Tabernacle in Newton's hand dating to 1701, along with invitations to meetings on 15 March 1717 and 19 December 1721, are extant. Public Record Office, London, Mint Papers (hereafter Mint Papers), 19/2, ff. 642–3; CUL MS Add. 3965 (18), f. 678; New College Oxford MS 361.2, f. 54; Newton, op. cit. (15), iv, 377–80, vi, 381, vii, 182.

129 John Disney, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Arthur Ashley Sykes*, London, 1785, 82–3.

130 Invitations are extant for meetings on 4 March 1717, 10 August 1717 and 6 July 1720. Mint Papers 19/2, f. 317r; Yahuda MS 7.3o, ff. 6r, 7r; Newton, op. cit. (15), vi, 406–7, vii, 484. The Commission was formed in 1711. Newton also possessed a copy of *The Acts of Parliament Relating to the Building of Fifty New Churches In and About the Cities of London and Westminster*, London, 1721, cited in Harrison, op. cit. (11), item 1260; Trinity College NQ.9.22.

131 An invitation is extant for a meeting on 13 October 1719 (New College Oxford MS 361.2, f. 77v; Newton, op. cit. (15), vii, 484) and there are records for Newton's attendance at twelve meetings of this Commission between the years 1715 and 1721. See the 'Minute Book', *The Wren Society* (1939), 16, 116–18, 130, 132–6. But there were limits to Newton's willingness to compromise with idolatry and he left this Commission after opposing Archbishop Wake's support for mounting pictures in the Cathedral (Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1v). Newton saw the use of images as idolatrous. Yahuda MSS 7.1j, ff. 11r, 12r; 7.2j, ff. 102r, 110r; 7.3a, ff. 9r–10r; 7.3c, f. 13r; Keynes MS 5, ff. 116r, 128r; Bodmer MS 2, f. 21r; cf. Clark MS f. 48v.

132 Richard Bentley was also in attendance. Entry for 10 November 1705 in Clyve Jones and Geoffrey Holmes (eds.), *The London Diaries of William Nicolson Bishop of Carlisle 1702–1718*, Oxford, 1985, 301.

133 Entry for 15 May 1689, *Commons*, op. cit. (27), 10, 133.

134 Entry for 17 May 1689, *Commons*, op. cit. (27), 10, 137.

135 All of this assumes that Newton actually attended on the day the committee met. Unfortunately, the record is silent on this detail. It is certain, however, that Newton was both asked and expected to attend.

various actions as simulatory, in practice they were (even when and if he did not actively seek out the appointments).¹³⁶ The favourable impression he made on his orthodox friends stands as stark testimony to their effectiveness.

Newton's converts Haynes and Whiston offer useful comparisons. We are told that Haynes made known his opposition to aspects of the Anglican liturgy by sitting down at appropriate moments.¹³⁷ Whiston at first contented himself with refraining from repeating the Athanasian Creed and then progressed to sitting down when this Creed was read, 'to shew the whole Congregation [his] disagreeing thereto'.¹³⁸ If Newton ever followed such practices, it is certain we would have known. Of course, Newton also had the advantage of the collusion of his parish priest: fellow heretic Samuel Clarke.

How did Newton view the sociology of Nicodemism? In his early treatise on Revelation, written in the 1670s shortly after he became a heretic, Newton alludes to Jewish leaders like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and lays down a firm anti-Nicodemite policy:

when thou art convinced be not ashamed to profess the truth. ffor <otherwise> thou mayest become a stumbling block to others, & inherit the lot of those Rulers of y^e Jews who believed in Christ but yet were afraid to confess him least they should be put out of the Synagogue. Wherefore when thou art convinced be not ashamed of y^e truth but profess it openly...¹³⁹

He goes on to declare, 'rejoyce if thou art counted worthy to suffer in thy reputation or in any other way for y^e sake of y^e Gospel'.¹⁴⁰ Here, certainly, is an example in which Newton's ideals do not match his actions. Interestingly, Newton uses the verb 'dissemble' three times in his 'Paradoxical questions'.¹⁴¹ On the question of whether the Church Council of Sardica was Arian despite appearances, he wrote,

If you say they dissembled & were Arian in their heart while they were orthodox in their langua[ge I] must ask you how you or any man else ~~know~~ can know [that] <For an accusation wthout knowledge is that w^{ch} y^e world calls clamour calumny & malice.>... We have no other means of knowing men's faith but by profession <& outward> ~~way~~ communion & way of worship.¹⁴²

Newton, later a victim of such calumny himself, had no trouble seeing the contemporary implications:

[Should] any ~~body of men~~ church of o^{ur} age ~~accuse any~~ charge [heresy] upon any body of men of her own communion, & ...only reply that notwithstanding <their communion profession & practise> they were hereticks in their hearts & ~~only dis...~~ such proceedings ~~ought justly~~ would by all sober men be accounted as <malitious &> barbarous & ~~mo~~ as any we ever heard of[f].¹⁴³

It seems remarkable that Newton could write such things in a private document. Clearly, he knew from personal experience that outward conformity was no guarantee of inward

136 Cf. Westfall, op. cit. (1), 594, 815, 828.

137 DNB.

138 Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i, 327–8.

139 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 6r. Newton is paraphrasing John 12: 42.

140 Yahuda MS 1.1a, ff. 6r–7r.

141 Clark MS, ff. 12r, 13r, 13v, 53r. A second draft of this treatise also includes these three examples. Keynes MS 10, ff. 7r, 8r (bis), 28r. The fourth examples in both manuscripts are in a quotation from Athanasius.

142 Clark MS, f. 12r. See the further uses of this word in Keynes MS 5, ff. 60r, 137r, 137v; Yahuda MSS 7.1e, f. 30r; 7.1j, f. 9r (bis); 7.1k, f. 2r; 7.1n, f. 26r; 7.1o, f. 14r; 7.2j, f. 121v.

143 Clark MS, ff. 12r–13r; Keynes MS 10, f. 7v.

orthodoxy. It is possible that he is arguing that observers only have a right to comment on outward actions, thus preserving the private sphere as the jurisdiction of the individual and his or her God. This reasoning may also have been preparatory to a defence should he ever be exposed. In another manuscript, writing on the terrible excesses of the fourth-century Trinitarian persecuting power, Newton is acutely sensitive to the effects of such oppression on the minority non-Trinitarians, writing that ‘if at y^e spoiling them of their Churches only were thus afflicted, what think you was their grief afterward when their worship even in private houses was interdicted[?]’.¹⁴⁴ Newton shared their horror at the forcible imposition of idolatry and was enraged at the gross impiety of legislating an end to private dissenting worship. As he well knew, the domestic sphere was sacred as the only unpoliced domain in which he himself could exercise heresy in peace and without opposition.

Newton had to guard his words on a daily basis; a casual slip or an indiscrete turn of phrase could have spelled disaster. Two incidents shed light on Newton’s dissimulation. Stukeley was witness to a revealing incident that occurred when Godfrey Kneller was painting his 1720 portrait of Newton. Noting that ‘it was Sir Isaac’s temper to say little... I was delighted to observe Sir Godfrey, who was not famous for sentiments of religion, sifting Sir Isaac to find out his notions on that head, who answered him with his usual modesty and caution’.¹⁴⁵ Gaetana Debi, the first wife of Antonio Cocchi (himself known for unorthodoxy), is reputed to have asked Newton his opinion on the immortality of the soul – a litmus test of orthodoxy. Newton replied: ‘Madam, I’m an experimental philosopher’.¹⁴⁶ Given what we now know of his mortalist leanings, this response can be seen as an artful Nicodemite evasion: no lie is told and the incriminating question is left unanswered.¹⁴⁷

The caution apparent in Newton’s actions Whiston did not hesitate to label as fear and suspicion.¹⁴⁸ Allowing for Whiston’s bias, other reports confirm Newton’s tight-lipped stance. John Flamsteed wrote of Newton’s ‘Naturall temper’ as ‘suspicious and too easy to be possess with calumnies’.¹⁴⁹ In July 1727 Wodrow heard that Newton ‘was jealous of himself, and when enquired, or in conversation, he chose to be silent, unles he wer perfectly master of the subject, or sure of what he had to say’.¹⁵⁰ Hearne recorded testimony that Newton ‘was full of thought, and spoke very little in company, so that his conversation was not agreeable’.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Benjamin Smith (a half-nephew who lived with Newton from 1718) testifies that his uncle ‘was in general silent and reserved’.¹⁵² Newton’s tenant

144 Yahuda MS 1.4, f. 58r.

145 Stukeley, op. cit. (5), 12–13.

146 Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men collected from Conversation* (ed. James M. Osborn), 2 vols., Oxford, 1966, ii, 561. Cocchi lived in England from 1723 to 1726.

147 As many associated Lockean empiricism and hence experimentalism with mortalism, Newton’s answer may contain another layer of meaning.

148 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1071, 1077; cf. Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (46), i, 251.

149 Flamsteed to John Lowthorp, 10 May 1710, *The Correspondence of John Flamsteed* (ed. Eric G. Forbes et al.), Bristol, 1997, ii, 818.

150 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), iii, 432.

151 T. Hearne, *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne* (ed. C. E. Doble), 11 vols., Oxford, 1885–1921, ix, 293.

152 J. Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols., London, 1817–58, iv, 2.

at Woolsthorpe said that Newton ‘was a man of few words... but that when he did speak ’twas very much to the purpose’.¹⁵³ But the most relevant testimony comes from Wodrow, who in 1729 recorded the observation of Colin Maclaurin, who claimed that Newton ‘was extremely cautious in his discourse’ on religious matters.¹⁵⁴ While these reports may owe something to common expectations of the philosophical recluse, given the range of the sources, they nevertheless must reflect a characteristic manifest to those who knew him well. Ample evidence presented above reveals the practical necessity for Newton’s discretion – particularly in theological discussion. Yet it must also be said that what was for Whiston an evident sign of weakness and failure was a worthy mark of wise conduct for a member of the remnant who had reasons to maintain a Nicodemite stand. This does not mean, however, that Newton never whispered a word while tearing down the altars of Baal at night.

SOWING THE SEED IN SECRET: NEWTON’S NETWORKS AND PROGRAMME OF EVANGELIZATION

Newton opened his early treatise on Revelation with the words ‘Having searched [~~& by the grace of God obtained~~ <after> knowledge in y^e prophetique scriptures, I have thought my self bound to communicate it <for the benefit> of others, remembering y^e judgment of him who hid his talent in a napkin’.¹⁵⁵ Scholars have presented hardly a comment on the possibility that Newton was engaged in proselytizing. He knew the biblical injunctions to preach; the above allusion is to Luke 19: 20. There are many others, including the Great Commission itself (Matthew 28: 19). While Newton’s youthful enthusiasm may have become jaded through politics, pragmatics and prudence,¹⁵⁶ he nevertheless did develop a programme of evangelization – albeit barely visible to contemporaries and later historians.

It may be that for the first fifteen to twenty years after his conversion to anti-trinitarianism, Newton only ‘thundered... in the isolation of his chamber’.¹⁵⁷ Astute heretics, however, do not leave paper trails. If Newton had come into contact with a clandestine antitrinitarian network during these years, it may help explain why his early 1689 introduction to Locke so soon involved theological dialogue. Whatever the case, in 1690 Newton sent his heretical confidant his ‘Two notable corruptions’ with instructions that it be published – albeit anonymously, on the continent and in French. However, his

153 Spence, *op. cit.* (146), i, 351.

154 Wodrow, *op. cit.* (84), iv, 59.

155 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 1r. Square bracket as in original.

156 See, however, Keynes MS 3 (which probably dates from after 1710), where Newton speaks of the need ‘to instruct & enlighten one another in knowledge & fear of...our Lord’ after baptism (p. 44).

157 Westfall, *op. cit.* (1), 323. Nevertheless, even in this early period Newton’s two chamber-fellows at Cambridge – John Wickins (c. 1663–83) and Humphrey Newton (c. 1683–8) – had some knowledge of his theological research. Both acted as amanuenses for Newton, and although this duty was usually limited to Newton’s natural philosophical works, Newton had Wickins copy out an innocuous anti-papal prophetic writing (Yahuda MS 23), and had Humphrey both write out portions of at least four of his heterodox manuscripts (Yahuda MSS 9, 13.2, 16.2 and 22), and also copy some material into his *Commonplace Book* (Keynes MS 2, p. 101), thus exposing him to the heretical material in that notebook as well. Westfall plausibly surmises that Newton thought his second chamber-fellow ‘not sophisticated enough to understand the implications of what he was copying’ (*op. cit.* (1), 350).

accompanying letter to Locke demonstrates that he was toying with the idea of having it published in English as well.¹⁵⁸ The boldness of Newton's actions must be seen against the backdrop of the then raging Trinitarian controversies,¹⁵⁹ and it is clear which side he would have been supporting. But the early 1690s were still dangerous times for a heretic and when Newton heard rumours about the publication of the 'Two notable corruptions', he immediately told Locke to suppress it.¹⁶⁰

After his initial meetings with his fellow heretic Locke, Newton continued to reveal his beliefs to others. The Swiss mathematician Nicholas Fatio de Duillier was one of the first of Newton's theological disciples,¹⁶¹ although we cannot be certain of the degree to which their discussions ventured into heretical theology. To Fatio's name we can add Hopton Haynes, Newton's associate at the Mint. Newton became Haynes's patron and helped him move up the ranks at the Mint to the position of assaymaster.¹⁶² A recently published letter shows that by 1701 Haynes was corresponding with Jean le Clerc about Romans 9: 5 – a pivotal text in antitrinitarian exegesis – and that their correspondence had aroused suspicions among the orthodox.¹⁶³ This exchange may have been prompted by Newton, for whom direct contact with someone in possession of the 'Two notable corruptions' could have been hazardous. Haynes was also linked with leading Unitarian Henry Hedworth.¹⁶⁴ Characterized by Richard Baron as 'the most zealous *unitarian*' he had ever known,¹⁶⁵ Haynes's later publications confirm him to have been a strident opponent of Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁶⁶

Clarke and Whiston followed between 1704 and 1706. Whiston also provides an insight into Newton's proselytization tactics. In what was likely a meeting of Whiston and Clarke with Newton, Whiston refers to 'an excellent Friend' of his opening a discussion by stating 'that for his part, had it not been for the Church's farther Determination, he had been contented with the *Arian Scheme*'.¹⁶⁷ Although Whiston stresses that this man's 'words at that time a little shock'd us both', both he and Clarke went on to accept views resembling Arianism. Whiston speaks of other occasions when the two were given access to Newton's theological and prophetic views.¹⁶⁸ Unlike Whiston, with whom Newton broke in 1714 (probably because of Whiston's transgressions of publicity), Clarke enjoyed uninterrupted theological access to Newton. Indeed, Newton's half-nephew Benjamin Smith testified that

158 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 82. Locke sent a copy of the document to Jean le Clerc in Amsterdam.

159 On which see Stephen Trowell, 'Unitarian and/or Anglican: the relationship of Unitarianism to the Church from 1687 to 1698', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* (1996), 78, 77–101.

160 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 195.

161 Charles A. Domson, *Nicolas Fatio de Duillier and the Prophets of London*, New York, 1981, 46–51.

162 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 559–61, 592–4.

163 Haynes to le Clerc, 5 May 1701, Jean le Clerc, *Epistolario* (ed. M. Grazia and M. Sina), 2 vols., Florence, 1987–91, ii, 363–5.

164 McLachlan, op. cit. (21), 316.

165 Baron, op. cit. (62), i, p. xviii.

166 See especially H. Haynes, *The Scripture Account of the Attributes and Worship of God: and of the Character and Offices of Jesus Christ*, 2nd edn., London, 1790.

167 W. Whiston, *An Historical Preface to Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, London, 1711, p. ix. Baillon also concludes that this 'excellent Friend' 'est vraisemblablement Newton' (Baillon, op. cit. (64), 176).

168 Whiston, *Clarke*, op. cit. (46), 156; *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i, 36, 98; *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1075–6.

Clarke was Newton's closest friend and supporter for the last two decades of the latter's life.¹⁶⁹ It was through Clarke that Newton's theological network also included royalty in the person of Caroline, Princess of Wales, a supporter of Clarke widely rumoured to be heterodox.¹⁷⁰ Richard Mead, Newton's friend and personal physician in his final years, knew enough about his patient's beliefs to inform Stukeley that Newton was a Christian who believed in revelation, but 'not all the doctrines which our orthodox divines have made articles of faith'¹⁷¹ – telling testimony from one of the last men to speak with Newton.

Others, too, were given privileged knowledge of Newton's theology, including a group of notable Scotsmen. By May 1694, either through direct access or by means of a verbal epitome, Newton made David Gregory aware of his 'Classical Scholia' and perhaps more broadly his 'Origines' and its heterodox contents.¹⁷² Newton also told Gregory of his view that John's Gospel, John's Epistles and Hebrews 'recall the style of the Apocalypse, and are later than it', and revealed his unorthodox notion of successive creations.¹⁷³ In October 1694 another Scot, Archibald Pitcairne, attempted to obtain through the agency of Gregory 'a scheme of Mr Neuton's divine thoughts' as well as his 'thoughts anent differences in religion'.¹⁷⁴ A year later he sought access through Gregory to Newton's 'papers' on 'the mythologies' and 'Christian religion'.¹⁷⁵ Pitcairne's request was prefaced by a promise to translate Newton's *Opticks* into Latin – possibly an offering to gain the access he desired.¹⁷⁶ In 1706 Pitcairne reminded Gregory to 'keep Sir Isaac Neuton at work, that wee may have', among other things, 'his thoughts about God'.¹⁷⁷ The mathematician John Craig, who was aware that in matters of religion Newton's 'thoughts were some times different from those which are commonly receiv'd',¹⁷⁸ wrote to Conduitt,

~~I am very credibly informed~~ <And this I know> that he was much more sollicitous in his inquiries into Religion than into Natural Philosophy... ~~And some person informed me that~~ <And S^r Is: Newton> to make his inquiries into <the Christian> Religion the more successfull he had read the ancient writers and Ecclesiastical Historians with great exactness, & had drawn up in writing great Collections out of both.¹⁷⁹

169 Nichols, op. cit. (152), iv, 33; Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i, 250.

170 S. Cowper (ed.), *Diary of Mary Countess Cowper*, London, 1865, 74; T. Burnet, *Bishop Burnet's History of his own Time*, Oxford, 1823, v, 314; Thompson, Mrs (ed.), *Memoirs of Viscountess Sundon, Mistress of the Robes to Queen Caroline*, 2 vols., London, 1847, ii, 293; Keynes MS 129A, ff. 20–1.

171 Mead to Stukeley, 4 April 1727, *The Family Memoirs of the Rev. William Stukeley, M.D.* (ed. W. C. Lukis), 3 vols. London, 1882, i, 424.

172 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 336, 338. At some point before Gregory's death in 1708, Newton entrusted the former with a manuscript copy of the 'Classical Scholia', see Paolo Casini, 'Newton: the Classical Scholia', *History of Science* (1984), 22, 1–58.

173 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 332, 333, 334, 336.

174 Pitcairne to Robert Grey, 24 and 25 October 1694, in *The Best of our Owne: Letters of Archibald Pitcairne, 1652–1713* (ed. W. T. Johnston), Edinburgh, 1979, 19–20.

175 Pitcairne to Gregory, 16 October 1695, Johnston, op. cit. (174), 22. See also W. G. Hiscock (ed.), *David Gregory, Isaac Newton and their Circle: Extracts from David Gregory's Memoranda 1677–1708*, Oxford, 1937, 4.

176 Johnston, op. cit. (174), 22; Hiscock, op. cit. (175), 3.

177 Pitcairne to Gregory, 25 February 1706, Johnston, op. cit. (174), 43.

178 Craig to Conduitt, 7 April 1727, Keynes MS 132, f. 2r.

179 Keynes MS 132, f. 2r. Craig's 1727 letter to Conduitt is often quoted, but never before with the strike-outs retained, which suggest that some of his information came from a third person.

Finally, we now know that late in life, Newton revealed his unorthodox views on the Trinity in a guarded manner to mathematician Colin Maclaurin, who told Wodrow that he had heard Newton ‘express himself pretty strongly upon the subordination of the Son to the Father, and say, that he did not see that the Fathers, for the first three or four centuries, had opinions the same with our modern doctrine of the Trinity’.¹⁸⁰

In the months before his death Newton met with the Socinian Samuel Crell, grandson of Johann Crell, who was in England to publish an antitrinitarian work.¹⁸¹ A formerly unavailable letter from Samuel Crell to Newton shows that before their first personal meeting in July 1726 (which had been arranged by another person), Crell had sent Newton a list of propositions for his book, seeking patronage. Nor did Crell shy away from revealing the main thrust of the work: ‘if only Christian Theologians had seen and acknowledged that Christ is nowhere in Scripture *expressly* called God...so many controversies about the Deity of Christ [*Christi Deitate*] would not have been stirred up’.¹⁸² This unequivocally antitrinitarian statement shows that Crell knew Newton’s position – knowledge that must have come from someone else (possibly Locke, with whom Crell had stayed in 1699).¹⁸³ Crell was also careful to assure Newton that his name would not be revealed. Furthermore, the letter shows that Newton had ‘liberally’ assisted Crell’s return to Germany some fifteen years earlier – a previously unknown contact.¹⁸⁴ Nor was this the only personal encounter between the ageing heretics, for Crell later recounted that while in England, he had ‘spoken at different times’ (*aliquoties sum locutus*) with Newton. Crell also noted that Newton had ‘wished to read my book, and did read it...because it seemed to contain new things’.¹⁸⁵ What is more, at some point Newton placed ten guineas in Crell’s hand.¹⁸⁶ Since Newton’s library contained Crell’s volume,¹⁸⁷ this support possibly related to the latter’s subscription drive. Newton’s multiple patronage of a known Socinian heretic is revealing. Most significantly of all, both the 1711 and 1726 contacts presuppose the involvement of unnamed mediators: Newton’s sympathies must have been known among the *respublica litteraria haereticalis*.¹⁸⁸

Such theological networking and proselytizing tactics are confirmed by Whiston, who in 1728 wrote of Newton ‘of late communicating his Thoughts’ on prophecy and heretical theology to others and testified that he had revealed his beliefs on Arianism and Athanasius to ‘those few who were intimate with him all along; from whom, notwithstanding his

180 Wodrow, *op. cit.* (84), iv, 59.

181 J. Crell, *Initium Evangelii S. Joannis Apostoli*, [London], 1726.

182 Crell to Newton, 16 July 1726, Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek, Wallers autografsamling England och USA (hereafter Uppsala). This letter, uncovered after *The Correspondence of Sir Isaac Newton* (*op. cit.* (15)) was complete, has been left virtually untouched by scholars. See the abbreviated translation in A. Rupert Hall, ‘Further Newton correspondence’, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* (1982), 37, 33.

183 E. S. De Beer (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Locke*, 8 vols., Oxford, 1976–89, vi, 459–60, 466–7, 495, 576–7, 638.

184 Crell to Newton, 16 July 1726, Uppsala.

185 Crell to M. V. de la Croze, 17 July 1727, *Thesauri epistolici Lacroziani*, 3 vols., Leipzig, 1742, i, 105.

186 Charles Jordan, *Recueil de littérature*, Amsterdam, 1730, 44.

187 Harrison, *op. cit.* (11), 459.

188 Here it is worth noting that Crell’s mid-1720s visit to England involved contact with other antitrinitarian dissenters as well. Crell, *op. cit.* (185), i, 104–5.

prodigiously fearful, cautious, and suspicious Temper, he could not always conceal so important a discovery'.¹⁸⁹ In the case of his above-mentioned meeting with Whiston and Clarke, Newton's strategy is obvious: he spoke favourably of an antitrinitarian form of theology ('Arian' may simply be Whiston's gloss), yet was cautious enough to allow a way out by implying submission to the pronouncements of the Church. We see similar care taken in Newton's discussions with Maclaurin.¹⁹⁰ Whiston records a heterodox discussion he and Clarke had with Newton on the episcopal system, as well as the fact that by 1712 Haynes was aware of Newton's anti-paedobaptist and antitrinitarian positions.¹⁹¹ It is likely that Newton also worked with other individuals of whom direct evidence is now lost. One such example is related by Whiston, who writes that sometime before 1704 or 1705 Newton had steered a tutor at King's College, Cambridge away from Socinianism to Arianism.¹⁹² While it is impossible to determine whether Whiston or his source were using these labels accurately, this account again suggests that Newton was involved in antitrinitarian networks.

Newton did not stop at private evangelization. We have seen that in 1690 he intended to publish his 'Two notable corruptions'. While he suppressed it in 1692, there is evidence to show that in later years Newton again considered publication. By 1709 he had commissioned Haynes to translate this document into Latin (or at least the first part on the *comma Johanneum*).¹⁹³ The appearance of 'Amsterdam. 1709' on the title-page suggests intended publication. In a letter written after Newton's death, Haynes not only confirmed that he had translated the document 'at the desire of S^r. Isaac', but also disclosed that Newton had 'intended them for the Press, and only waited for a good opportunity'.¹⁹⁴ While a 'good opportunity' does not seem to have come, Newton's intentions are revealing. Nor were Locke and Haynes the only associates of Newton with privileged knowledge of the 'Two notable corruptions'; sometime before 1715, both Clarke and Whiston were aware of its existence.¹⁹⁵ Bentley may have known as well.¹⁹⁶ Thus, in a manner common to the republic of letters, Newton may have granted an inner group access to this treatise – or even allowed a restricted circulation of manuscript copies of the document.¹⁹⁷

189 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1075, 1077.

190 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), iv, 59.

191 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1074–6.

192 Whiston, *Clarke*, op. cit. (46), 13.

193 Yahuda MS 20; manuscript notes in the British Library copies of Whiston's *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1075 and *Athanasian Forgeries*, London, 1736, 3. In the latter source, Whiston states that Haynes translated both parts of the 'Two notable corruptions'. Yahuda MS 20 is written in Haynes's handwriting, with corrections in Newton's hand.

194 Haynes to John Caspar Wetstein, 17 August 1736, British Library Add. MS. 32,425, f. 388r. This previously uncited letter offers the clearest evidence to date of Newton's intentions for the 1709 translation. Whiston also hints that the translation was designed for the press. Whiston, *Athanasian Forgeries*, op. cit. (193), 3.

195 Whiston, *Clarke*, op. cit. (46), 100. By 1738 Whiston actually had a copy of the 'Two notable corruptions' (or at least the portion on 1 Timothy 3: 16) in his possession. Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i, 306. However, since he does not seem to have possessed a copy in 1715, he may have acquired his after Newton's decease.

196 Compare with Edleston, op. cit. (60), p. lxxx.

197 On such literary practices, see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, Oxford, 1993; cf. Baillon, op. cit. (64), 185–216.

As in his natural philosophy, Newton used agents to help achieve his theological goals and this may have been one of his motivations for revealing his faith to others. Clarke is the most obvious example. We know that Clarke translated Newton's *Opticks* into Latin and did battle with Gottfried Leibniz on the former's behalf; Newton's involvement in the latter affair has been confirmed.¹⁹⁸ A note in the final edition of Clarke's Boyle Lectures indicates that two arguments relating to Daniel's Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks had been 'extracted out of a MS communicated by Sir Isaac Newton; and was published in his *lifetime* in the foregoing Editions of this Discourse, with his *express* consent'.¹⁹⁹ Whiston also claims that Clarke borrowed prophetic interpretations from Newton and that 'he used frequently to hear Sir Isaac Newton interpret Scripture Prophecies'.²⁰⁰ Andrew Michael Ramsay, who had discussions with Clarke shortly before the latter's death, affirmed that Newton 'voulut... renouvella l'Arianisme par l'organe de son fameux disciple & interprete M. Clarke'.²⁰¹ If Newton really did want to restore 'Arianism' through Clarke, it is possible that he helped inspire Clarke's *Scripture-Doctrine*.²⁰² Still, Newton's name was not attached.

In 1713, however, Newton did publish an element of his theology under his own name. Larry Stewart has recently shown that the theological elements in the General Scholium to the second edition of the *Principia* were meant to proclaim his antitrinitarian faith and support Clarke; moreover, several theological adepts – friend and foe – recognized this.²⁰³ No scholar has yet identified the exact nature of the theology in the General Scholium, other than to note affinities with Arianism. I want to argue that it is also informed by Socinianism. In 1714 John Edwards claimed that Newton's notion of God as a relative term as presented in the General Scholium had been lifted out of the thirteenth chapter of Johann Crell's *De Deo et ejus attributis*.²⁰⁴ Trinitarians posit that the term God is absolute and refers to essence; Socinians argued that it is relative, obtaining its meaning from office, dominion and power. Crell makes this very point in Chapter 13 of his *De Deo*, writing that the term God 'is neither by nature particular, nor does it signify God's essence

198 A. Rupert Hall and Marie Boas Hall, 'Newton and Clarke', *Isis* (1961), 52, 583–5.

199 S. Clarke, *The Works of Samuel Clarke, D.D.*, 4 vols., London, 1738, ii, 721. This partially confirms the rumour Wodrow heard in 1725 (on which, see below), as this material was republished in 1725 as a response to Anthony Collins's attacks on biblical prophecy. Much bolder was another example when Newton allowed Clarke to pass on the results of some of his antitrinitarian historical research to Whiston, who used it in a 1714 published attack on Athanasius. See Whiston's annotation to the relevant passage in the British Library copy of his *An argument to prove that, either all persons solemnly tho' irregularly set apart for the ministry, are real clergy-men, and all their ministerial acts are valid; or else there are now no real clergy-men, or Christians in the world*, 2nd ed., London, 1714, 32. Confirmation that this information did come from Newton exists in the two drafts of Newton's antitrinitarian 'Paradoxical questions'. The material published by Whiston, testimony of eighty bishops at the Council of Sardica from Hilary's 'Fragments', appears in Clark MS, f. 26r and Keynes MS 10, ff. 18v–19r.

200 Whiston, *Clarke*, op. cit. (46), 156.

201 Ramsay to Louis Racine, 28 April 1742, *Oeuvres de Mr. L. Racine*, 6th edn., 6 vols., Amsterdam, 1750, iii, 199.

202 T. Pfizenmaier also argues for this in *The Trinitarian Theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke (1675–1729): Context, Sources, and Controversy*, Leiden, 1997, 174–6.

203 L. Stewart, 'Seeing through the Scholium: religion and reading Newton in the eighteenth century', *History of Science* (1996), 34, 123–65.

204 J. Edwards, *Some Brief Critical Remarks on Dr. Clarke's Last Papers*, London, 1714, 36–7.

itself... the term God is principally a name of power and empire'.²⁰⁵ This is exactly the argument presented in the General Scholium. Newton claims that 'God is a relative word, and has a respect to servants... It is the dominion of a spiritual being which constitutes a God'.²⁰⁶ As Edwards implied, the presentation of God as a relative word and God as God of dominion are found in Crell's *De Deo*.²⁰⁷ Moreover, in his 1726, third edition Newton added a note to this passage that claims persons other than the supreme God can be called God – a classic Socinian argument also found in the same chapter of Crell's *De Deo*,²⁰⁸ as are three of the four proof texts Newton employed.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, Newton's added argument about false Gods is identical to what we find in another of Crell's writings.²¹⁰ Even if Newton had not used Crell's *De Deo* specifically, the argumentation and small *florilegium* of scriptural references are typical of Socinian hermeneutics.²¹¹ No orthodox theologian was presenting concepts like these. The parallels are simply too close and the theology too distinctly Socinian to be ignored. The General Scholium is a heretical document.²¹²

Thus Newton was indeed preaching his faith.²¹³ It was a strategy of proselytization carried out almost completely in the private sphere and done so, as we have seen, not only for legal and social reasons. This reconstruction of Newton's actions tallies well with his belief that the deeper things of theology should only be handled by the experienced and mature members of the remnant and, even then, only in private. But there still remains the problem of the vast corpus of heretical manuscripts that Newton left behind at his death. It is possible that their survival is a mere accident of their accumulation for purposes of personal study and edification, along with limited circulation among his followers. The evidence outlined above demonstrates that men like Humphrey Newton, Locke, Gregory, Haynes, Clarke and Whiston²¹⁴ were either given access to, or had knowledge of, Newton's theological manuscripts, thus suggesting one of the uses Newton intended for some of his theological writings, and possibly explaining (along with his almost pathological

205 J. Crell, *De Deo et ejus attributis*, N.p.p., 1631, 100. The portion cited by Edwards is underlined.

206 I. Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (tr. Andrew Motte and Florian Cajori), 2 vols., Berkeley, 1962, ii, 544; cf. Bodmer MS 5A, f. 9r.

207 Crell, op. cit. (205), 89–102, 161–91.

208 Newton, op. cit. (206), ii, 544 n.*; cf. Keynes MS 3, p. 45r; Bodmer MS 5A, f. 9r; Crell, op. cit. (205), 94–9.

209 Crell, op. cit. (205), 94–6, 99.

210 Crell, op. cit. (179), 5.

211 Lubieniecki, op. cit. (31), 161–5; Williams, op. cit. (33), 104.

212 Thus Westfall prematurely concluded that Newton neither published antitrinitarian theology nor 'kept the unorthodox aspects of his religion to himself'. Westfall, op. cit. (1), 653, 828; but cf. 651. Furthermore, the presentation of Socinianism in the Scholium, along with the integral role the God of dominion played in Newton's theology (also present in the Scholium), may cause us to question Westfall's conclusion that Newton's theology did not influence his natural philosophy. Ibid., 139–40. For evidence that Newton's antitrinitarian theology did play a role in his natural philosophy, see James E. Force, 'Newton's God of Dominion: the unity of Newton's theological, scientific, and political thought', in Force and Popkin, op. cit. (4), 75–102. See also S. Snobelen, "'God of Gods, and Lord of Lords": the Theology of Isaac Newton's General Scholium to the *Principia*,' *Osiris*, forthcoming 2001.

213 Baillon, 'La réformation permanente: les newtoniens et le dogme trinitaire', in *Le Christ entre orthodoxie et Lumières* (ed. M.-C. Pitassi), Geneva, 1994, 123–37.

214 Although Whiston in 1728 (and hence after Newton's death) displayed a detailed knowledge of the contents of Newton's theological manuscripts, by his own indirect admission much of his information was derivative from the testimony of others. Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (193), ii, 1075, 1077–8.

fastidiousness) the existence of multiple drafts of the same material.²¹⁵ Alternatively, it is possible that Newton intended to preach posthumously through the more formalized and coherent manuscripts he allowed to survive him (such as the material eventually published as the *Chronology* and the *Observations*), even though the heretical edge had been written out of these documents.²¹⁶ That this is a real possibility and no mere speculation is made plain by the similar strategy he hinted at in the 1670s for his natural philosophical work. Frustrated by the disputes engendered by his 1672 paper on colours in the *Philosophical Transactions*, Newton wrote to John Collins that he had ‘learnt what’s to my convenience, wch is to let what I write ly by till I am out of ye way’.²¹⁷ Similarly, later the same month he told Henry Oldenburg that he would ‘bid adew’ to philosophy ‘eternally, excepting what I do for my privat satisfaction or leave to come out after me’.²¹⁸ Thus Newton lays out two strategies of private writing and posthumous publication that may have operated in his theological programme as well. Newton’s last act, his refusal of sacrament,²¹⁹ may also have been an attempt to proclaim his faith. Perhaps with this action, and by bestowing heretical manuscripts to posterity, Newton intended to remove the mask of Nicodemism only in death.

‘THE WHITEST SOUL’: NEWTON AS BELIEVER

From his Cambridge days Newton gained a reputation as a theologian. In 1692 Abraham de la Pryme, then a student at St John’s, referred to Newton as ‘a most excellent mathematician, philosopher, divine, etc.’.²²⁰ While the term ‘divine’ may merely be a loose extension of a characterization of Newton as a polymath, it is not inconceivable that it reflects an image he had acquired by that time.²²¹ Around the same time, the textual critic John Mill, who had become aware of Newton’s extensive work in this field, sought the latter’s assistance with his critical edition of the New Testament.²²² In the late 1670s Newton prepared and probably delivered at his College one and possibly two lay sermons.²²³ Seeking advice, Thomas Burnet sent Newton a pre-publication draft of

215 Nevertheless, Newton must have realized that any circulation of these heterodox manuscripts – no matter how carefully controlled – was a dangerous business allowing for the possibility of unauthorized copying. In fact, this is exactly what happened in the early 1720s when Newton forwarded to Princess Caroline a manuscript summary of his work on chronology. See Frank Manuel, *Isaac Newton, Historian*, Cambridge, MA, 1963, 21–36.

216 Yet even the whitewashed texts eventually published as the *Observations* contained recognizable anti-Athanasian material – nor did this pass unnoticed in the years after its release. See Zachary Grey, *An Examination of the Fourteenth Chapter of Sir Isaac Newton’s Observations*, London, 1736. Nor should we conclude, from Westfall’s comment (op. cit. (1), 830) that Newton ‘carefully laundered what he himself prepared for publication’, that those manuscripts in the best shape do not include ones that feature heresy. Documents like Keynes MS 10 and Newton’s Church history (Bodmer MS) have the appearance of being fair copies prepared for either scribal or print publication.

217 Newton to Collins, 8 November 1676, in Newton, op. cit. (15), ii, 179.

218 Newton to Oldenburg, 18 November 1676, in Newton, op. cit. (15), ii, 183.

219 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1r.

220 Abraham de la Pryme, *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, London, 1870, 23.

221 It is possible that this reputation was based partly on the testimony of his chamber-fellows Wickins and Humphrey Newton.

222 Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 289–90, 303–4, 305–7; Baillon, op. cit. (64), 189, 196–9, 208, 252.

223 See Yahuda MS 21; Babson MS 437; Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas (Austin) MS HRC 130.

material from his *Telluris theoria sacra* in late 1680 and the two men had a short epistolary exchange on the interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis.²²⁴ We also know that as early as 1680 Newton had held detailed discussions at Cambridge with Henry More over the interpretation of the Apocalypse.²²⁵ Newton's theological prowess is confirmed by those who knew him best. Locke described Newton as 'a very valuable man not onely for his wonderful skill in Mathematicks but in divinity too and his great knowledg in the Scriptures where in I know few his equals'.²²⁶ In 1700, when the Mastership of Trinity was offered to Newton on the condition he take orders, Archbishop Tenison 'importuned him to [take] any preferment in the Church', pleading, 'Why will you not? you know more divinity than all of us put together.' Newton replied equivocally, 'why then...I shall be able to do you more service than if I was in orders'.²²⁷

Testimonies of Newton's Bible-centred faith are also on record. Conduitt wrote of Newton that 'the book commonly laying before him & w^{ch} he read often at last was a duodecimo bible'.²²⁸ A similar attestation made it into Fontenelle's *Éloge*.²²⁹ Stukeley, oblivious to the horrible irony of heretical intent, expostulates:

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 which are not printed, and even by the Bible which he commonly used, thumbd over, as they call it, in an extraordinary degree, with frequency of use.²³⁰

Flamsteed also reported seeing a bible in Newton's room in 1700.²³¹

While Conduitt and Stukeley were attempting to construct an image of Newton as pious student of Scripture, we can cut through the myth-making and corroborate this testimony with more substantive documentary and physical evidence. First, there is Newton's own expression of the ideal to study the Word, writing to his reader of the need to 'search the scriptures thy self [through] frequent reading and constant meditation upon what thou readest'.²³² Much later in life he wrote that after baptism and admission into communion, men are 'to study the scriptures <to the end of their lives> & learn as much as they can out of them & live accoding [*sic*] to what they learn'.²³³ Newton clearly acted on these ideals, as his theological manuscripts reveal a close and extensive familiarity with Holy Writ, demonstrating, as Manuel says, that 'studying this book was Newton's worship'.²³⁴ Another striking measure of biblical studies is Newton's collection of over thirty bibles –

224 On this, see Scott Mandelbrote, 'Isaac Newton and Thomas Burnet: biblical criticism and the crisis of late seventeenth-century England', in *The Books of Nature and Scripture* (ed. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin), Dordrecht, 1994, 149–78.

225 See Rob Iliffe's full account in "'Making a shew": apocalyptic hermeneutics and the sociology of Christian idolatry in the work of Isaac Newton and Henry More', in Force and Popkin, *op. cit.* (224), 55–88.

226 De Beer, *op. cit.* (183), vii, 773.

227 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1v.

228 Keynes MS 130.15, f. 5r.

229 Fontenelle, *op. cit.* (48), 29. For this, Fontenelle's primary – and perhaps only – source was Conduitt.

230 Stukeley, *op. cit.* (5), 70.

231 Flamsteed's account implies (although does not demand) that the bible had been left out after use. J. Flamsteed, *The Correspondence of John Flamsteed* (ed. E. G. Forbes *et al.*), 2 vols., Bristol, 1997, ii, 818.

232 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 2r.

233 Keynes MS 3, p. 41 (cf. p. 3).

234 Manuel, *op. cit.* (2), 83.

including texts in English, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French and Syriac.²³⁵ One bible described as annotated by Newton – a 1660 duodecimo and possibly the bible Conduitt saw – is thought to be lost, but the surviving description implies that it was well worn.²³⁶ One of Newton’s surviving bibles, a 1660 octavo, also contains annotations and with its dog-eared and heavy soiling shows signs of sustained reading and study.²³⁷ All of this offers a compelling glimpse of what was an intensely private and individual faith.

Further testimonies highlight Newton’s piety. Bishop Gilbert Burnet favoured Newton with the observation that the great man was ‘the whitest soul he ever knew’.²³⁸ Voltaire, struck during his 1726 conversations with Clarke that the latter always mentioned the name of God with great reverence, was told by Clarke that he had learned the habit from Newton.²³⁹ This compares well with Newton’s manuscripts, which decry naming God ‘idly & without reverence’.²⁴⁰ Conduitt, soothing his own alarm over Newton’s refusal to receive the sacrament on his deathbed, wrote that Newton’s ‘whole life was a preparation for another state’ and that ‘he had his lamp always ready lit & his loins girted’ – alluding to Luke 12: 36.²⁴¹ Indeed, his apocalyptic chronology notwithstanding, Newton’s own words imply that he prayed daily for the Kingdom to come.²⁴² Hardly the cold, religious rationalist of some accounts, he also speaks of Jesus as ‘our Lord’ and of having ‘made an atonement for us & to have <satisfied Gods wrath &> merited pardon & to have washed away our sins in his blood’.²⁴³ Newton concerned himself with the spiritual welfare of others as well. He helped Fatio through a spiritual crisis in 1692, with the Swiss mathematician expressing his gratitude to Newton: ‘I thank God my soul is extremely quiet, in which you have had the chief hand.’²⁴⁴ In 1716 or shortly before, Newton acted as a spiritual advisor to Joseph Morland, who assured the former, ‘I have done and will do my best while I live to follow your advice to repent and believe’, and then added: ‘Pray write me your opinion whether on the whole I may dye with comfort’.²⁴⁵

There was also much untrumpeted charity. The son of Newton’s chamber-fellow, Wickins, speaks of ‘a Charitable Benefaction’ that Newton passed privately through his father and him for the dispensing of ‘many Dozens of Bibles sent by him for poor people’, which, Wickins’s son adds, ‘bears y^e great regard he had to Religion’.²⁴⁶ Newton gave £10

235 Harrison, *op. cit.* (11), items 186–217.

236 Harrison, *op. cit.* (11), item 189; Manuel, *op. cit.* (2), 83.

237 Trinity College, Adv.d.1.10². Given the diminutive size of this bible, which Harrison lists as an octavo (*op. cit.* (11), item 188), it is possible that this is actually the bible to which Conduitt referred.

238 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1r (Burnet died in 1715).

239 Voltaire, *The Metaphysics of Sir Isaac Newton*, London, 1747, 3.

240 Yahuda MS 1.1a, f. 6r; Keynes MS 3, pp. 5, 27, 35; Keynes MS 9, ff. 1r, Ar, Br (citation from Keynes MS 9, f. 1r).

241 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1r.

242 Yahuda MS 7.2g, f. 4r; New College Oxford MS 361.3, f. 89r.

243 Keynes MS 3, pp. 3, 36. See also pp. 32 (bis), 37, 43, 48; Keynes MS 8, f. 1r; Keynes MS 9, ff. 1r, Br.

244 Fatio to Newton, 17 September 1692, in Newton, *op. cit.* (15), iii, 230.

245 Morland to Newton, n.d., in Newton, *op. cit.* (15), vii, 383.

246 Keynes MS 137. A draft letter in Newton’s hand (dating from after 1713) records an instance in which Newton sent thirty bibles to the poor. New College Oxford MS 361.2, f. 39r; Newton, *op. cit.* (15), vii, 368. The draft contains no addressee, but Westfall concludes that the letter was directed to Wickins. Westfall, *op. cit.* (1), 343.

towards a scheme to set up charity schools in Cambridge,²⁴⁷ and became a paying subscriber to the Commission for relieving poor proselytes.²⁴⁸ He also put money toward the repair of his boyhood parish church in Colsterworth.²⁴⁹ Moreover, a note in his octavo bible attests that Newton gave it to the woman who nursed him in his final illness.²⁵⁰ These are but a few illustrative examples; Westfall records Newton's numerous acts of charity to family and strangers, concluding that it was 'well above average' for a man of his means.²⁵¹

Coupled with these claims and signs of piety are recollections of Newton's moral austerity and intolerance of levity in religion. His half-niece Catherine Conduitt recalled how Newton 'could not bear to hear any one talk ludicrously of religion', and that he was 'often [a]ngry with D^r Halley on that score' and even 'lessened his affection for Bentley' because of this.²⁵² Benjamin Smith confirms this testimony.²⁵³ One anecdote has Halley 'talking against Christianity before Sir Isaac, and saying that it wanted mathematical demonstration', at which Newton stopped Halley by saying, 'Mun, you had better hold your tongue; you have never sufficiently considered the matter.'²⁵⁴ Catherine Conduitt also related that Newton broke a long-standing friendship with the chemist John Francis Vigani, upon the latter's 'telling him a loose story: about a Nun'.²⁵⁵ To this we can add Whiston's claim that Newton had told him that 'the wicked Behaviour of most modern Courtiers' had been caused by 'their having *laughed themselves out of Religion*'.²⁵⁶ Let there be no mistake; in his biblicism, piety and morality, Newton was a puritan through and through.

Finally, Newton supported apologetic efforts against unbelief. Craig wrote that Newton 'was much more sollicitous in his inquiries into Religion than into Natural Philosophy; & that the reason of his showing the errors of Cartes's Philosophy, was because he thought it was made on purpose to be the foundation of infidelity'.²⁵⁷ Newton's manuscripts substantiate his hatred of atheism, the proponents of which he had no trouble consigning to God's 'book of death'.²⁵⁸ A firm advocate of the Design Argument,²⁵⁹ he claimed in his

247 Cooper, *op. cit.* (110), iv, 66. The scheme, initiated in 1704 largely through the efforts of Whiston (then Lucasian Professor), provided poor children with catechetical and general education.

248 Evidence for contributions exists in the form of a notice (dated May 1718) and a receipt (dated 31 January 1722). Mint Papers 19/2, f. 106v; New College Oxford MS 362.2, f. 68v. A published booklet also lists Newton among the subscribers to this Commission, *An Account of the Establishment for Relieving poor Proselytes*, 5th edn., London, 1722, 31. The proselytes were French converts from Catholicism.

249 Stukeley, *op. cit.* (5), 69; Newton, *op. cit.* (15), vii, 303, 318, 347. After Newton's death, twenty pounds were paid out of his estate for the poor of Colsterworth. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, Hastings MSS Miscellaneous Box 9 (1), f. 14r.

250 Trinity College, Adv.d.1.10.

251 Westfall, *op. cit.* (1), 854–9, 861.

252 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1v.

253 Nichols, *op. cit.* (152), iv, 33.

254 [William Seward], *Supplement to the Anecdotes of some Distinguished Persons*, London, 1797, 98.

255 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 1r.

256 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, *op. cit.* (193), ii, 1074.

257 Keynes MS 132, f. 2r.

258 Keynes MS 3, pp. 29, 35, 38; Keynes MS 5, f. 12Ar; Keynes MS 7, f. 1r (citation from Keynes MS 5).

259 Newton, *op. cit.* (206), ii, 543–4, 46; *idem*, *Opticks*, New York, 1952, 402.

famous letters to Bentley that he intended the *Principia* to reveal the Creator.²⁶⁰ Newton added to this the Prophecy Argument for revelation.²⁶¹ Nor is it insignificant that his two closest disciples, Whiston and Clarke, were among the period's most vocal anti-deists.

Certainly, as men like Robert Hooke, Flamsteed and Leibniz could attest, Newton was far from being a perfect saint, and a comprehensive picture must incorporate all of the contradictions. Nevertheless, the material presented in this section has helped locate Newton's religious middle: although a heretic, he had a great respect for Scripture and true religion, and was an active opponent of unbelief. With some of the testimony, however, it is difficult to sift between reality and construction. Conduitt was collecting material for a projected biography of Newton and was not prone to record testimony that would contradict what would have been a veritable hagiography. Another problem is the misreading of Newton's devotion to the Scriptures as a sign of orthodoxy. That such misreading could be accidental is revealed by Wodrow, who, on hearing that Locke had been engaged in reading his bible before his death, remarked, 'it's a most eminent instance of God's sovereign dealing with one of the main propes of the Socinians and Deists, and may be a means to engage his admirers to value the Scriptures'.²⁶² For Wodrow, a biblicist antitrinitarian was a contradiction in terms. While it was not possible to provide the world with tokens of Newton's orthodoxy, Conduitt could still use Newton as a weapon against unbelief. Thus he writes,

If there be any of so narrow principles as ~~to thi~~ not to bear with his not going into one point of the highest orthodoxy let them reflect what an advantage it is to Christianity in general <in this age of > infidelity is to have a Layman such a Philosopher &c. have spent so much study upon divinity & so publick <& strenuous> an ~~espouser of~~ <advocate for> it.²⁶³

As for Stukeley, when he was not able to point to direct confirmations of orthodoxy, he used the best evidence available: Newton's piety, Bible-reading and regular church attendance.²⁶⁴ By reading these things as signs of orthodoxy, interpreters failed to recognize (or acknowledge) the added complication of Newton's Nicodemism. The following section will demonstrate another reason why such attestations were deemed so necessary.

'CLAMOUR CALUMNY & MALICE': NEWTON AND THE RUMOUR MILL

The degree to which Newton was able to keep the heresy within the private sphere will provide a measure of the strictness of his Nicodemism. For this, the evidence of the ever-active rumour mill is invaluable to show that even Newton, who meticulously controlled his image and access to his person, could not quell rumours about his heresy. Some of these rumours were initiated by the exploits of his disciples. When Whiston was

²⁶⁰ Newton, op. cit. (15), iii, 236, 240.

²⁶¹ Newton, op. cit. (96), 251–2.

²⁶² Wodrow, op. cit. (84), i, 39–40.

²⁶³ Keynes MS 130.7, f. 2v.

²⁶⁴ Stukeley, op. cit. (5), 69.

on trial for heresy in 1711, Wodrow wrote that ‘it is said [Whiston] has not only much of his Mathematicks, but severall of his other errors from Sir Isaack Neuton, which’, Wodrow nevertheless adds, ‘I incline not to believe’.²⁶⁵ Before long the rumour mill was hinting at conspiracy. Edwards, who may have known more than he made out, surmised in 1712 that Whiston and Clarke were working together to oppose the Trinity.²⁶⁶ Two years later Wodrow was told by ‘good hands’ that Whiston, Clarke, Newton and Bishop Moore were involved in an Arian conspiracy.²⁶⁷ The same year, Edwards accused Clarke and Newton of conferring notes together, ‘as it is thought’, to add Socinian argumentation in the General Scholium, and that Newton had intended with this to appear in favour of Clarke’s unorthodox *Scripture-Doctrine*.²⁶⁸ In his literary debate with Clarke, Leibniz, too, accused Newton of holding to a Socinian view of God.²⁶⁹

Nor did such talk disappear after this turbulent period. In 1725 Wodrow wrote, ‘I am told that Dr Clerk is extremely intimat with Sir Isaack Neuton, and had much of what he published from him; particularly what he has writt against [Anthony] Colins and others is all the fruit of his conversation with Sir Isaack’.²⁷⁰ Thus innuendoes about Clarke’s complicity with Newton were still making the rounds over a decade after the former published his *Scripture-Doctrine*. Although he believed otherwise, Whiston recorded in 1728 that Newton was rumoured to have been the author of an antitrinitarian tract called ‘*The History of the Great Athanasius*’ – a suspicion raised because the views presented therein were ‘so very like Sir I.N.’s Notions of that famous Heretick’.²⁷¹ Since the inner group would have known better, this suspicion must have had wider circulation.²⁷²

But there were worse rumours yet. Once in a heated exchange with Flamsteed, in 1711, Newton accused the former of calling him ‘*Atheist*’. Although he denied this, Flamsteed recorded that he nevertheless knew ‘what other people have said of a paragraph in his *Optics*; which probably occasioned this suggestion’.²⁷³ Similarly, alluding to the natural

265 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), i, 325.

266 J. Edwards, *Some Animadversions on Dr. Clarke’s Scripture-Doctrine*, London, 1712, 5.

267 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), ii, 285. Wodrow repeated this rumour in 1727 (ibid, iii, 461).

268 Edwards, op. cit. (204), 36.

269 Albeit on a mistaken premise. Still, the mere use of the label would have added fuel to the speculation. See *A Collection of Papers, which Passed between the Late Learned Mr. Leibnitz, and Dr. Clarke, in the Years 1715 and 1716*, London, 1717, 30, 31.

270 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), iii, 205–6.

271 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (193), ii, 1078. Whiston may have been referring to *The Acts of Great Athanasius* (London, 1690), which is usually attributed to the Unitarian Stephen Nye. It is more likely, however, that Whiston is speaking of the anonymous tract entitled *The True History of the Great St. Athanasius* (London, 1719).

272 See also Speaker Arthur Onslow’s 1730 coffee-house revelations of Newton’s antitrinitarianism (*Diary of Viscount Percival afterwards first Earl of Egmont*, London, 1920, i, 113).

273 J. Flamsteed, *An Account of the Revd. John Flamsteed* (ed. F. Baily), London, 1835, 229. Westfall surmises that the passage is Query 28, where Newton describes infinite space as God’s sensorium, Westfall, op. cit. (1), 653. The association between mathematics and heterodoxy was already commonplace in the minds of many defenders of orthodoxy, quite apart from any specific rumours Newton faced. For example, an anonymous attack on the theology of Whiston and Clarke imputes their heresy to the fact that the two were ‘profound Mathematicians...[f]or Mathematicks and Revelation are seldom found to thrive well together; the one being conversant about Things *seen*, the other about Things not *seen*’ (*The equality of the Son and the Holy Ghost with the Father, in the Ever-Blessed Trinity*, London, 1714, sig. A2v). See also [George Berkeley,] *The Analyst; or, a*

philosophy of the *Opticks* and *Principia*, Leibniz wrote to Princess Caroline in 1715 expressing his concern about the orthodoxy of Newton's work.²⁷⁴ Nor were these completely uncommon inferences. In 1713 George Hickes wrote that the 'Newtonian philosophy ... hath Made Not onely so Many Arrians but Theists'.²⁷⁵ Sometime before 1726, the Bishop of Oxford claimed 'that the greatest deists we have now came ex Schola Newtoniana'.²⁷⁶ Thomas Hearne wrote in 1731 that Newton had 'little Religion', and 'therefore could not be a good Interpreter of Scripture'.²⁷⁷ The following year, Hearne expanded on this sentiment by observing that not only was Newton 'a man of very little Religion', but that he was 'ranked with the Heterodox men of the age', some making him 'with respect to belief, of no better principles' than the anti-scriptural deist Thomas Woolston.²⁷⁸

As a final indignity, and testifying to the almost infinite capacity of slander to degenerate to outrageous excess, Whiston referred to 'Surmises or Reports which have been sometimes spread abroad' that Locke and Newton 'had sometimes been, or that they died Infidels'.²⁷⁹ In a variation of these rumours, Samuel Johnson once affirmed that Newton 'set out an infidel, and came to be a very firm believer'.²⁸⁰ So, even though he never openly revealed his heretical beliefs, Newton was subject to rumours about his orthodoxy – or lack of it.²⁸¹

As slanderous and potentially inaccurate as these rumours are, it is possible to use this oral testimony to gain positive insights into Newton's activities. First, even with the most careful planning, it was inevitable that some of his public actions – or non-actions – should arouse suspicions. The rumours were in part artefacts of his Nicodemism. As early as 1705, Newton had to face cries of 'No Occasional Conformity' (a taunt aimed at dissenters) from 'a hundred or more young students', when he stood as a candidate for Parliament in Cambridge.²⁸² Newton was also exposed to the actions of his followers. Although he became a heretic in the early 1670s, and had been revealing his faith cautiously to select individuals from as early as 1689, the first substantial rumours of his unorthodoxy did not filter into the public sphere until the beginning of the 1710s. This was the same time that the heterodoxy of Newton's followers Whiston and Clarke became public knowledge, and nothing could hide the fact that Newton was associated with these men. With Whiston's

Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician, London, 1734 and [James Jurin], *Geometry no Friend to Infidelity: or, a Defence of Sir Isaac Newton and the British Mathematicians, in a Letter to the Author of the Analyst*, London, 1734.

274 Westfall, op. cit. (1), 777–8.

275 Hickes to Roger North, 23 May 1713, British Library Add. MS, 32551, f. 34v.

276 Spence, op. cit. (146), i, 387.

277 Hearne, op. cit. (151), x, 412.

278 Hearne, op. cit. (151), xi, 100–1.

279 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (47), ii, 1080, where Whiston also contradicts these reports.

280 S. Johnson, in J. Boswell, *Boswell's life of Johnson* (ed. G. B. Hill), Oxford, 1934, i, 455. Johnson appears to have picked up this anecdote from an 'acquaintance' of Newton, who had told Johnson 'that in early life [Newton] started as a clamorous infidel; but that, as he became more informed on the subject, he was converted to Christianity, and became one of its most zealous defenders'. [Seward], op. cit. (254), 98.

281 Thus Manuel was mistaken on both counts when he wrote of Newton that 'guilt by association was not invoked, and during his lifetime nobody cast aspersions on his Anglican orthodoxy' (Manuel, op. cit. (2), 7).

282 William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England*, 12 vols., London, 1810, vi, 496.

Primitive Christianity Reviv'd in 1711–12, followed by Clarke's *Scripture-Doctrine* in 1712 and Newton's General Scholium in 1713, it is not hard to see why the heresy watchdogs smelled an Arian conspiracy. Whether or not they were right, in the climate raised by Whiston's publications and prosecution, along with the release of Clarke's *Scripture-Doctrine*, Newton's theologically charged General Scholium was a daring enterprise.

Although Newton was careful and selective in sharing his faith, there is no reason to suppose that his followers were committed to the same degree of caution. Thus it is likely that some of the fuel for the rumours came from disciples who leaked information about their master's beliefs to the public. Here Whiston looms large. Apart from the obvious association between the two in the mind of the public, Whiston stirred the flames of suspicion by twice alluding to Newton's similar heterodoxy during his heresy proceedings. Embittered that he had to fight on his own, and almost certainly alluding to Newton, Whiston declared in 1711 that he was 'shock'd that [this] excellent Person does not more freely declare the Reasons of such his ancient Sentiments, and more freely endeavour the Alterations of such Things in our Church, as he cannot but know or suspect to be [unsupported] by the Christian Revelation in these Matters'.²⁸³ In 1712, Whiston went a step further and named names, appealing directly to Newton, Clarke and several others to leave behind worldly caution and support the cause of Primitive Christianity openly.²⁸⁴ Such public insinuations would not have passed unnoticed by either Newton or others. There is also unambiguous evidence from the years immediately after Newton's death that Whiston passed on information about Newton's theology in private conversations;²⁸⁵ it is possible that he had also engaged in this activity while the great man was still alive.

It is also clear that some of the rumours tell us more about people's expectations of heretics. Here the assumptions of the slippery slope go a long way to making sense of the more extreme rumour-mongering. It was commonly believed that Arianism was a stepping-stone to 'lower' Christologies, deism and even infidelity. Thus Wodrow claimed that 'the transition and leap' from Arianism to deism 'is very easy and naturall'.²⁸⁶ Edwards, for his part, saw an 'Atheistick Tang' in Socinianism.²⁸⁷ It is also evident that not everyone saw Newton as a hero. Thomas Hearne, orthodox, Tory and fiercely partisan Oxford man, is a case in point. So is the embittered Pierre Des Maizeaux, who countered testimony about Newton's charity.²⁸⁸ Some drew assumptions of irreligion from Newton's natural philosophy. Negative testimony played a contributing role as well; Newton offered few positive signs of orthodoxy. Ironically, Newton's career would have appeared suspiciously secular from the vantage point of an outsider. This lack of public orthodoxy made him an easy target for slander. Thus, alongside the active industry of representing him as orthodox, pious and orderly, there was a counter-current that perceived and portrayed Newton as heretical, irreligious and subversive.

283 Whiston, op. cit. (167), p. ix.

284 W. Whiston, *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, 2nd edn., 4 vols., London, 1712, iv, 196–7.

285 Entry for 21 April 1731, in *The Private Journal and Literary Remains of John Byrom* (ed. R. Parkinson), 2 vols., Manchester, 1854–7, i, 495.

286 Wodrow, op. cit. (84), iii, 516; cf. ii, 133–4, 341.

287 Edwards, op. cit. (58), 64.

288 P. Des Maizeaux's annotations in the preface to his copy of the French translation of Newton's *Chronology* in the Bibliothèque de la ville de Colmar, W.3695.

THE STRATEGIES OF A NICODEMITE

Conduitt claimed that ‘Sr I. had the happiness of being born in a land of liberty & in an age where he [could] speak his mind – not afraid of [the] Inquisition as Galileo was’.²⁸⁹ This was not entirely correct of Newton’s natural philosophy; it was patently untrue of his religious faith. As Mark Goldie has written, ‘Restoration England was a persecuting society’.²⁹⁰ Although toleration was increasing during the early eighteenth century, Newton still had reason to fear the powerful social inquisition. Barred from public expressions of his heresy, and in response to these restrictive structures, Newton accessed and developed a series of Nicodemite strategies and, with few exceptions, turned inward and contained his religion within the private sphere. Recovering these strategies is crucial to making sense of his public and private manoeuvres.

Attempts to align Newton with any single theological tradition will end in failure. Newton was an eclectic theologian, drawing from Anglicanism, Calvinism, Judaism,²⁹¹ fourth-century Arian sects, seventeenth-century radical theologies and his own exegetical innovation. The last three strands were heretical and his awareness of this brought the demands of isolation. But no man is an island – not even Newton. The euphoria of religious discovery and the need for fellowship induced him to seek spiritual communion with Locke, Fatio, Haynes, Whiston, Clarke and – perhaps earliest of all – in the books of Sand and the Polish Brethren. When Newton planned to publish his ‘Two notable corruptions’ in 1690, and when he did publish his General Scholium in 1713, his arguments and intentions aligned him with these and other antitrinitarian enemies of the Church. Here it is imperative that we understand Newton’s theological middle. We must jettison metaphors of verticality – in which orthodoxy is placed at the top and infidelity at the bottom – and reposition the scale horizontally. Newton had a clear sense of where he stood: on his right were the orthodox (who added to the truth) and on his left the infidels (who took away from it). The world around him was corrupt and in his idealism he set out to separate himself from it. To buttress his position, he appropriated theologies uncorrupted by homoousianism – ancient and modern – and which emphasized his Creator God of dominion. That Newton himself was no deist, there can be no doubt; deists do not believe in prophecy or the saving power of the blood of Christ, nor do they secretly donate copies of God’s Word to the poor. The inability of most contemporary observers to grasp Newton’s middle has led to a great deal of misconstruction. Viewed along the *x*-axis of biblicism and piety, Newton looked orthodox; yet along the *y*-axis of doctrine, he appeared heretical – even dangerously so. Thus from the actions of the same man emerged the two conflicting (and incorrect) portrayals of committed Anglican and radical infidel.

The utility of the rumours as an explanatory device should now be apparent. Most importantly, they acted as yet another limiting structure within which Newton had to operate. For a man who hated disputes, the rumours were confirmation of just how controversial open preaching would have been. The reports of unorthodoxy also provide

²⁸⁹ Keynes MS 130.7, f. 3r.

²⁹⁰ M. Goldie, ‘The theory of religious intolerance in Restoration England’, in *From Persecution to Toleration* (ed. O. P. Grell *et al.*), Oxford, 1991, 331.

²⁹¹ On this, see Matt Goldish, *Judaism in the Theology of Sir Isaac Newton*, Dordrecht, 1998.

an illustrative backdrop to Kneller's insistent prodding and Debi's provocative question. Working under a siege of innuendo, Newton was further entrenched in his policy of silence. A man who believed that philosophy was 'an impertinently litigious Lady'²⁹² was most unlikely to subject his heretical theology to the maelstrom of public opinion. After his decease, the existence of anti-Newton slander also motivated reactive image-making and attempts to control the jurisdiction of the public Newton. Realizing that the rumours of infidelity were at one level by-products of Newton's positioning of his faith within the private sphere, those with privileged knowledge of his piety wanted to compensate by thrusting this into the public domain. Craig pleaded with Conduitt to publish Newton's manuscripts, so that 'the world may see that S^r Is: Newton was as good a Christian as he was a Mathematician & Philosopher', which would prevent 'the Infidells' from pretending 'that his applying himself to the study of Religion was the effect of Dotage'.²⁹³ Whiston had his own partisan reasons for appealing for publication and Unitarian apologists later took up his call.²⁹⁴

Newton's heresy and Nicodemism are also valuable in explaining several aspects of his career. The pressures associated with his secret heresy and Nicodemite ways provide an additional backdrop to the breakdown of 1693.²⁹⁵ The pilgrimage from Cambridge to London in 1696, which Newton had sought for several years, may also be seen at least partly in light of his heresy. As Whiston was to discover fourteen years later, London offered a world without oaths or religious tests. Newton cultivated an image of respectability there and also engineered for himself the powerful protection of patronage and social connections. It is worthy of note, therefore, that clear evidence for Newton's heretical networking and proselytizing begins only in the late 1680s and early 1690s. Post-*Principia* confidence and the relative security of his London period help explain this beginning or increase in clandestine preaching. But security also came through the soothing of conscience, and a degree of reflexivity may be evident in the equivocal functions of his remnant theology and apocalyptic chronology as prescriptive or justificatory of his religious stance and high station in life. Ironically, although an ardent premillenarian in eschatology, his confidence in delaying the end to well beyond his lifetime meant that his attitude to his own age bore a troubling resemblance to the Augustinian amillenarian stance. The downfall of the kingdoms of men was remote enough to encourage his entrenchment in the affairs of this world, and to allow him the luxury of living a little less like a sojourner than his patriarchal namesake. The comfortable cloak of orthodoxy can all too easily ensnare and corrupt a Nicodemite. It is also noteworthy that the same dynamics that Rob Iliffe has admirably shown applied in Newton's natural philosophical negotiations²⁹⁶ also operated in his theological strategies. Newton surrounded himself with

292 Newton, op. cit. (15), ii, 437.

293 Keynes MS 132, f. 2r; cf. the request in the codicil to Catherine Conduitt's will, New College, Oxford MS 361.4, f. 139r.

294 Whiston, *Authentick Records*, op. cit. (193), ii, 1079; Robert Wallace, *Antitrinitarian Biography*, 3 vols., London, 1850, iii, 458–9, 463.

295 See also R. Iliffe, 'Isaac Newton: Lucatello Professor of Mathematics', in *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge* (ed. C. Lawrence and S. Shapin), Chicago, 1998, 139–40.

296 R. Iliffe, "'Is he like other men?'" The meaning of the *Principia mathematica*, and the author as idol', in *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration* (ed. G. Maclean), Cambridge, 1995, 159–76.

a coterie of disciples who were given special access to the meaning of his theology and who in turn acted as his agents. Indeed, many of these men were also his most vocal natural philosophical partisans.²⁹⁷ As in his natural philosophy, Newton's theology was only intended for the adepts.

Newton saw his *Principia* as a grand effort at reformation and the restoration of the *prisca theologia*.²⁹⁸ Betty Jo Dobbs has suggested that Newton believed the success of this work in restoring the true natural philosophy had also advanced the restoration of the true religion. This success, she argued, may have led Newton to redouble his efforts 'to more study of natural philosophy as the *best* way to restore true religion'.²⁹⁹ As valuable as this suggestion is, it is less helpful for explaining why Newton went on after the *Principia* to plan a publication on antitrinitarian textual criticism, nor does it illuminate his introduction of Socinian hermeneutics in the General Scholium. Newton believed that the corruption of religion and natural philosophy (including alchemy) were related,³⁰⁰ and his life's work showed that he thought their recovery was two parts of the same reformation. Whiston believed this too and expressed this twin effort in apocalyptic terms, holding the *Principia* to be a prelude to 'those happy *times of restitution*' spoken of by the prophets that would, together with his own work in reviving Primitive Christianity, help usher in the Millennium. Crucially, Whiston adds that Newton's 'corollaries relating to religion' in the *Principia* and *Opticks* were to this end.³⁰¹ Similarly, Conduitt wrote of Newton:

The only thing he was heard to say with pleasure of his work: was when he died he should have the satisfaction of leaving Philosophy [when he died] less mischievous than he found it – Those who will consider his Irenicum & Creed might ~~say the same~~ allow him to have said the same of revealed religion.³⁰²

Newton's bold, albeit coded, attack on the corrupt hermeneutics of the Trinitarians in the General Scholium opened a window on his dual agenda for the *Principia*. Here natural philosophy blends with heresy and Newton's half-century crusade against idolatry in natural philosophy and theology come together.³⁰³ Whether Cartesian or homoousian, unwarranted obtrusions of hypotheses on the truth were equally sinful. This radical thrust in the *Principia* underscores a problematic anti-establishment dimension of Newton's programme that both challenges Westfall's claim that Newton moved closer to mainstream Protestantism in the 1680s,³⁰⁴ and adds an ironic layer to the fact that 'Anglican hegemony after 1689...owed so much to Newtonian science'.³⁰⁵ In sum, Newton's heresy cannot be treated as a mere curiosity or irrelevant appendage; it was with him every day

297 It is also notable that men like Fatio, Haynes, Whiston, Clarke and Maclaurin were rewarded in different ways by Newton – possibly for the sympathy or openness they showed towards the views of their great patron.

298 Dobbs, op. cit. (76); Simon Schaffer, 'Newton's comets and the transformation of astrology', in *Astrology, Science and Society* (ed. Patrick Curry), Woodbridge, 1987, 219–43.

299 Dobbs, op. cit. (76), 170.

300 Yahuda MS 41, f. 8r.

301 Whiston, *Memoirs*, op. cit. (47), i, 34.

302 Keynes MS 130.7, f. 2v.

303 Compare with Pietro Redondi's treatment of the interplay between Galileo's atomism and eucharistic heresy in *Galileo: Heretic*, London, 1989. On Newton's anti-idolatry see R. Iliffe, "'The idols of the Temple": Isaac Newton and the private life of anti-idolatry', Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1989.

304 Westfall, op. cit. (10), 135.

305 M. Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West*, Oxford, 1997, 71.

and every hour, influencing his personal relationships, affecting his career path, guiding his reading practices, shaping his prophetic view of history and even informing the cognitive content of his natural philosophy.

Newton's natural philosophy looms large in at least one other way, for not only did some recognize heresy in the Scholium, but also his *Principia* was attacked for supposed latent materialistic features. Radicals like Toland were even using the *Principia* to buttress materialism.³⁰⁶ Others had impugned the *Opticks*. Insinuations about Socinianism had even appeared in print, and rumours of his personal heresy and infidelity were part of coffee-house chat. Newton was also well aware that he had enemies enough who would have pounced on any revelation of doctrinal waywardness. Newton knew the great damage the stain of heresy would do to the cause of his reformation in natural philosophy. Fear of this sort of public relations disaster must have been one of Newton's greatest deterrents to open preaching. He knew a time would come when this would not be so; he was too much a man of the world not to realize that that day had not yet come.

306 B. J. T. Dobbs and M. Jacob, *Newton and the Culture of Newtonianism*, New Jersey, 1995, 66–7.