



The Scientific Revolution: Its Classical and Christian History

with Dr. Ted Davis

Lecture 20: Newton,
the Man: Public
Science and Private
Religion

Outline:

Newton, the Man: Public Science and Private Religion

- Born on a family farm near Grantham, England, on Christmas Day 1642 (as reckoned in England). A posthumous child—his father, an illiterate but very successful yeoman farmer also named Isaac Newton, had already died almost three months earlier, at age 36. His mother, Hannah (Ayscough) Newton, was fairly wealthy herself and apparently had a basic education. Her brother, who graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge, would later influence her to allow her enormously talented son to go there also, against her better judgement.
- Isaac was a premature baby; late in life, he told his niece's husband "that when he was born he was so little they could have put him into a quart pot & so weakly that he was forced to have a bolster [cushion] all round his neck to keep it on his shoulders & seemed so little likely to live ...
 - "... that when two women were sent ... for something for him they sate down on a stile by the way & said there was no occasion for making haste for they were sure the child would be dead before they could get back."
- Just after Isaac turned three years old, his mother married a very wealthy minister, Barnabas Smith, whose first wife had died the previous year. Their combined assets probably placed the Smiths among the 1500 wealthiest families in England. Barnabas was about 30 years older than Hannah, and he wanted Hannah, not Isaac. She moved into his house, leaving Isaac back on her farm with his grandmother for the next 7½ years, until Mr. Smith died. Not surprisingly, Newton had a very difficult relationship with his mother and stepfather.
- Historian Frank Manuel made much of a few youthful jottings from Newton's pen; in his view, Newton saw his mother as playing the harlot with a lustful clergyman—and he vented his anger on many others the rest of his life. Manuel also suggested that God was Newton's substitute father—an interesting idea, but impossible to confirm or refute from evidence.
- Regardless, Newton was certainly a very difficult person to know perhaps he had Asperger syndrome or some other form of autism. As Richard S. Westfall said, "Newton was a tortured man, an extremely neurotic personality who



- teetered always, at least through middle age, on the verge of breakdown.” — Never at Rest (1980), p. 53
- Perhaps he actually had a nervous breakdown in his 51st year (1692-93), when he wrote strange letters to Samuel Pepys and John Locke, and behaved even more erratically than usual. In Sept 1693 he apologized to John Locke for the false charge he had earlier made, “that you endeavoured to embroil me with woemen,” and that “when one told me you were sickly ... I answered twere better if you were dead.”
 - Perhaps this change in temperament resulted from mercury poisoning. For decades, he experimented with mercury in his closed rooms, breathing vapors and tasting various mercury compounds. Surviving locks of his hair do contain high concentrations of heavy metals.
 - Or, perhaps it resulted from the strain of intense work in physics and alchemy for several years.
 - Two years after he was re-united with his mother, when he was 12 years old, Isaac went off to grammar school in Grantham. There he learned Latin, the Bible, and a little Greek.
 - “the grammar school of the seventeenth century had as its primary goal the development of proficiency in Latin, not merely the ability to read it, but also to write and to speak it. Latin was the sole path that led on to higher education.”—Westfall, Never at Rest (1980), p. 57
 - He boarded with an apothecary and his family; he briefly had a crush on the daughter, who later said he was always “a sober, silent, thinking lad.” (p. 59)
 - When Newton began his studies at Grantham, he was next to the bottom of the academic pecking order. A crucial incident took place one morning, when an older boy kicked him violently in the abdomen, while they were walking to school. Newton went on to become the dominant student in the school.
 - When he turned 17, his mother brought him home to manage the farm. Her son was simply incompetent: wholly absent-minded, inattentive to the sheep and derelict in his other responsibilities. At the urging of her brother and the schoolmaster, she sent him back to Grantham. The next summer, however, he went to Cambridge.
 - At Cambridge, Newton was a “sub-sizar,” an impoverished student who paid his way by waiting on wealthier boys— carrying food & beer to their rooms from the buttery, polishing boots, emptying chamber pots. Why did he have to do this, if his mother was so wealthy? She really didn’t want him to be there!
 - The faculty member who was most important for Newton was Isaac Barrow, the first Lucasian Professor of Mathematics. Barrow was deeply impressed by Newton’s ability, and he used his influence to advance Newton’s career, starting with a scholarship Newton was given at the end of his third year at Cambridge.



- By far his most important favor, however, occurred when Barrow resigned his position as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics in order to return to his first love: the Anglican ministry. He recommended the 27-year-old Newton as his successor. Newton made this the most famous professorship in the world, recently held by the late Stephen Hawking.
- Although he attended Anglican services regularly, Newton did not believe a central article of Christian faith: the Deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He was formally a heretic who denied the Trinity. He guarded his views carefully, since public exposure would result in ostracism and the loss of his position at Cambridge. Although there were a few rumors about his unorthodoxy during his lifetime, only a few trusted friends actually knew for sure. Consistently with his views, however, Newton declined to receive the Sacrament as he lay dying.
- Newton based his conclusions partly on detailed study of the Bible, which did not (in his opinion) actually teach the Trinity. He also delved deeply into church history, especially the 4th century controversies about the divine and human nature of Jesus.
- Newton sided with Arius, who believed that Jesus was a created being, though not a mere human. Athanasius, who argued for the full divinity of Jesus, was seen by Newton as a deceitful idolator, a great enemy of the true church—which (in his opinion) had shrunk to just a tiny minority in his own time. Experts differ on the precise details of his position—some think he held a fully Arian view, while others think his position was not quite identical to that of Arius—but all agree that Newton completely rejected the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity, as perversions of genuine Christianity. Newton saw Trinitarianism as “the Great Apostasy foretold by God when men would fall away from the true worship into idolatry; the plagues and vials of wrath of the Apocalypse, corresponding to the barbarian invasions of the empire, were God’s punishment on a stiff-necked people who had gone whoring after false gods.” —Richard S. Westfall, “The Career of Isaac Newton,” *American Scholar* (1981), p. 351
- Newton had an equally low view of Roman Catholicism and the Papacy. As the first church to embrace the Trinity, Catholicism elicited a special scorn. The concentration of power in the Papacy had ruined the purity of the early church—which had not worshipped Christ as God.
- While Newton had to keep quiet about his rejection of the Trinity, however, public opposition to Catholicism only enhanced his status in Protestant England. Indeed, he was elected to Parliament in 1689 and again in 1701 on the basis of his stance against allowing Catholics to be admitted to Cambridge—a policy pursued by James II, the last Catholic monarch of England.
 - Specifically, in Feb 1687 the king tried to force the university to admit Alban Francis (d. 1715), a Benedictine monk, as a student for the M.A. degree. The king officially ordered the university to accept him, “without administering unto him any oath or oaths whatsoever, or



tendering any subscription to be made by him”— in other words, without making him swear loyalty to the Anglican Church. Newton was a ringleader against the king; he even appeared in court to defend the university’s privileges from royal interference.

- Newton stood for Parliament again in 1705, this time unsuccessfully. Rumors of his religious heterodoxy may have been a factor in his defeat. However, he was knighted at Trinity College by Queen Anne, the new Protestant monarch, to help bolster his candidacy during the campaign—not for his contributions to science, but simply for political reasons.