Isaac Newton's Heresy at New College

Isaac Newton, a grave and prickly man, never travelled outside England. By the end of the 1680s, Newton was firmly ensconced in his lodgings at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had been Lucasian Professor of Mathematics since 1669.[1] The first edition of the *Principia Mathematica* was published in 1687. He was now famous. For the next few years, however, his focus remained not the theories of mixed mathematics or public preferment, but Biblical exegesis. The subject of this article is Newton's most controversial religious principle: his bitterly held opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity. To Newton, the idea of the Godhead as three consubstantial parts was unnecessary and overcomplicated. Since the flowering of interest in Newton's religious works in the 1970s, archival research has focused on the manuscripts at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem, and at King's College, Cambridge.[2] In recent years, historians of science have paid greater attention to one part of the Newton manuscripts collection at New College, *An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture* (New College Library, Oxford, MS 361/4).[3] Written in 1690, it is among Newton's most fiercely argued texts. He maintains that the biblical sources had been corrupted by figures such as Athanasius and Jerome to support the 'Testimony of the Three in Heaven'. His purpose? To let his friend John Locke 'understand the many abuses w^{ch} they of y^{e} Roman Church have put upon y^{e} world'.[4] However, it is argued here that this essay underlines several other of Newton's purposes. His anti-Catholicism was only one strand of this exacting exegesis. Moreover, the *Historical Account* points towards its author's wider principles of theology and natural philosophy. Principal among them is Newton's unitary conception of God. To one leading scholar, 'it is only with a sense of awkwardness and artificiality that we continue to speak about interaction *between* the two elements of a grand project that was for Newton a unified whole'.[5] Perhaps the greater integration of Newton's anti-Trinitarianism will do something to solve that problem.

Newton's argument is deliberately simple. The doctrine of the Trinity, he claims, had been interpolated, over a period of centuries, into the received text of the New Testament. Jerome had put it 'in expres words into his Version', before Latin Christians of the Roman Church let it 'creep into the text' when transcribing more ancient versions.[6] From the 12th century onwards, writes Newton, the Trinity became central to the doctrine of the Roman Church. Based on spurious historical justification, it had become unquestioned dogma. This accusation was one typical of many Protestant reformers—casting aspersions on the 12th- and 13th-century innovations of the Catholic Church.[7] 'Revived by the Schoolmen', the notion of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as one body now occupied

For their advice and encouragement towards this article I am grateful to Jacob Chatterjee, Matthew Leech-Gerrard, and Christopher Skelton-Foord.

[1] In 1703, John Locke said that Newton was a 'nice' man; in his time, the term had connotations more of a 'tricky or particular' type. See Mark Goldie, 'Isaac Newton and John Locke: In Public and in Private', *Newton & the Mint: The Newton Project*: <https://newtonandthemint.history.ox.ac.uk/economic-theories/newton-and-locke>(Accessed: 8 July 2025).

[2] For a recent celebration of work which goes against this historiographical grain, see Jack Avery, '"A chain of invincible reasoning"? Isaac Newton's Writing Practices in the New College Manuscripts', *New College Notes* 17 (2022), no.6, or Rob Iliffe, 'Friendly Criticism: Richard Simon, John Locke, Isaac Newton and the *Johannine Comma*', in *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, ed. Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 137–57.

[3] Isaac Newton, 'An historical account of two notable corruptions of Scripture, in a Letter to a Friend', New College Library, Oxford, MS 361/4, ff. 1r–41r.

[4] ibid, f. 1r.

[5] Stephen D. Snobelen, 'To Discourse of God: Isaac Newton's Heterodox Theology and His Natural Philosophy', in *Science and Dissent in England, 1688–1945*, ed. Paul Wood (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 39–65, at p. 5.

[6] MS 361/4, f. 1r.

[7] See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651). Hobbes puts much blame on the Schoolmen, and Popes such as Innocent III.

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a central position in the structure of orthodox Christian belief. At its most straightforward, Newton's argument in the *Historical Account* is that such interpolations are a 'pious fraud'.

In the rest of the *Account*, Newton goes into great detail to back up his case: he is at times legalistic, at others witheringly sarcastic.[8] The principal targets of his animosity are Jerome and Athanasius. Newton claims that Jerome's 'Vulgate' edition of the New Testament contained numerous marginalia, which were seized upon by later editors, and crept into the main body of the text. Moreover, when attacked for 'falsifying the scripture', Jerome 'makes answer that former Latine Translators had much erred from the faith in putting only the spirit water & blood in their edition & omitting the testimony of the three in heaven whereby the Catholick faith is established'. His conclusion is that 'the testimony of the three in heaven was wanting in the Greek Manuscripts from whence Ierome . . . pretends to have borrowed it'.[9]

Newton's primary focus is a passage known to biblical scholars as the *Johannine Comma*. The Comma is a phrase in the First Epistle of John which declares the Father, Son and Holy Ghost to be One.[10] Numerous exegetes before Newton had written on the possibility of the comma having been interpolated by later transcribers. There was no Comma in what many scholars saw as the most ancient Greek sources for the New Testament. Nonetheless, it had been included, with some controversy, in *Textus Receptus* editions, and in the King James Bible of 1611. In the latter, we read: 'For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and Holy Ghost: and these three are one'. In a more modern version, the Comma is revised, as follows: 'And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree'.[11] In 1690, this second version was heresy. To Newton, it expressed the straightforward truth of Christ's relationship with God.

In 1689, an English translation appeared of a book by the Roman Catholic priest Richard Simon, a *Critical History of the Text of the New Testament*.[12] It was the sequel to a previous volume on the Old Testament by the same author which had stirred up exegetical controversy in 1678. In both volumes, Simon went into great detail on the reliability of the ancient manuscripts. In the 13th chapter of his second volume, he wades into the debate on the Johannine Comma. Simon argues that the Preface to the Epistles that is listed under Jerome was not in fact written by 'that Father'. The Oratorian priest concurs with Newton that the 'Doctrinal Point was formerly written in the Margin', only later to be 'inserted in the Text by those who transcribed the Copies'.[13] The claim that 'these three are one', therefore, came after Jerome, by way of marginalia. Nonetheless, Simon concludes in a very different way to Newton.[14] To Simon, 'the Text runs very well with that Addition [the Comma]'. Moreover, the 'best copies' of the oldest Latin manuscripts have it extant. In Simon's account, Jerome is acquitted, whereas Newton puts him near the centre of the conspiracy. Having cast serious doubt on the provenance of some major sources of the Trinity in the Gospels, Simon nonetheless accepts

[8] See, for the latter case, his concurrence with Richard Simon over the impossibility of the Arians having blotted the doctrine of the Trinity from their Versions: 'Yes truly those Arians were crafty Knaves that could conspire so cunningly & slyly all the world over at once . . . to get all men's books into their hands & correct them without being perceived: Ay & Conjurers too', MS 361/4, f. 10r.

[9] MS 361/4, ff. 5r, 6r.

[10] The 'comma' is in the Greek meaning, of an interpolated clause or phrase.

[11] As quoted in Stephen D. Snobelen, '"To us there is but one God, the Father": Antitrinitarian Textual Criticism in Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England', in *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, ed. Hessayon and Keene, pp. 116–36, at p. 116.

[12] Richard Simon, *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament; Wherein Is firmly Establish'd the Truth of those Acts on which the Foundation of Christian Religion is laid*, 2 vols (London: R. Taylor, 1689).

[13] ibid, II, 1, 2.

[14] Rob Iliffe, *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 375–9.

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its use as a piece of Christian doctrine. For Simon, the idea of a triune godhead fulfils a purpose for the coherence of the Christian message. For Newton, it is a zealous complication.

In line with many 17th-century exegetes, Newton's argument takes on the subject of patristics. Into his view come the Church Fathers Cyprian, Jerome, and Athanasius in particular. Newton's patristic argument develops the evidence he takes from Roman Catholic exegetes. As the work of Jean-Louis Quantin, Dmitri Levitin, and Scott Mandelbrote has made clear in recent decades, patristics was popular among Protestant exegetes throughout the 17th century.[15] Study of the early church was one way to tackle the difficult questions facing Protestants in times of theological crisis: how 'pure' was the early Church? How reliable was the doctrine of *sola scriptura* if the biblical manuscripts had problems of their own? Was there a point in history at which the 'true Church' had been corrupted by the papacy? These questions were especially pertinent to such strict low churchmen as Newton. In asking these questions, Newton's intellectual remit was broad. For example, he drew upon the work of the Jesuit historian Denis Pétau. Pétau argued that the example of the early Church did not give firm historical legitimacy to Trinitarian belief.[16] The Church Fathers' textual work was mired in obscurity and the political struggles of the early Church. Pétau's intention was to show how successful the Catholic Church had been in 'articulating doctrine' throughout history; Newton used his evidence to show the corruptions of the early Church, which had only continued under the papacy. For Newton, the Protestant Reformation was an important moment in the defeat of the Beast and Whore of Babylon prophesied in the Book of Revelation. But his Protestantism was of a unique kind: the original sins of the established Church, to his mind, went back much further than most Protestant writers would dare to presume. Not only was the papacy of the present day doing the work of Antichrist; the rot had set in during the fourth century. Pétau and Simon came to very different conclusions to Newton, but their evidence was a useful source for his anti-Trinitarianism. This incorporation of Roman Catholic writers into his Protestant exegesis was a distinct characteristic of Newton's work.

How, then, did Newton use Simon's work? He does not mention the *Critical History* in the *Historical Account*, but it is highly unlikely the work had passed him by, given the scandalous fame it received upon publication. Anti-Trinitarian writings enjoyed a brief flourishing in England during these years, due to the ill-fated Declaration of Indulgence rolled out by James II in 1687. The works of the 1680s and 1690s owed much to the Socinian anti-Trinitarians tracts published in the middle of the century. Socinians continued to take aim at how Trinitarian belief failed convincingly to describe God. The Church Fathers, they said, referred to God 'analogously'. The idea of a triune Godhead had introduced too many complications to the simple identity of God. While orthodoxy wrote of the Trinity's eternal 'mystery', anti-Trinitarians continued to see this as a get-out clause. Rather than revealing it, the Trinitarian orthodoxy obscured God and His work. It got Christians no closer to a simple and true understanding of Him.[17] For Newton, it was historically suspect too, since the doctrine of the Trinity had been used by figures such as Athanasius as a means to maintain political control over the early Church. Simon's work, therefore, provided the basis for much of Newton's philological work. But in his conclusions, he went far beyond Simon's implicit scepticism – to buttress an historical and theological assault on the doctrine.

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[15] Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Dmitri Levitin, 'Early Modern Biblical Criticism and the Republic of Letters', *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* 6 (2021), 427–64, and Scott Mandelbrote, '"A duty of the greatest moment": Isaac Newton and the Writing of Biblical Criticism, *British Journal for the History of Science* 26 (1993), 281–302.

[16] Stephen D. Snobelen, 'Newton's Theology', in *Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences*, ed. Dana Jalobeanu and Charles T. Wolfe (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 1–17.

[17] Diego Lucci, 'Reassessing the Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England: Recent Studies by Jason Vickers, Sarah Mortimer, Paul Lim, and Others', *Cromohs: Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 19 (2014), 154–63, at pp. 157–8.

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However, we should ask what drove Newton's anti-Trinitarianism to such theological and historical gymnastics. At a fundamental level, he saw the doctrine as unnecessary—in both terms. It was historically devious, since contemporary Christians assumed the Trinity had always been supported by Scripture, despite Newton's revelation of its relatively recent provenance in medieval editions. But the theological reasoning behind Newton's belief was ultimately more important. To him, the notion of the three being made one—'manifested in the flesh' as one substance—misled believers away from the central truth of Christianity. The Newton documents in New College Library highlight the force with which he propounded this view of the inherent simplicity of Christian truth.

Newton's writing is diffuse, even when transcribed digitally. Much of the writing in the New College collection is challenging to decipher, and the long passages of historical references in the library's MS 361/4 are densely presented.[18] However, around a third of the way through the *Account* Newton's writing becomes larger and eminently legible, with sentences frequently underlined for emphasis. The focus becomes striking as Newton gets closer to his depiction of the body of Christ, his alternative doctrine of Christ's relationship with God and the Holy Spirit:

> **This is he that** after y^{e} Iews had long expected him, **came** first in a mortal body **by** baptism of **water and** then in an immortal one by shedding his **blood** upon the crosse & rising again from the dead: **not by water only but by water & blood**.[19]

The visible strength of Newton's conviction on the page is arresting. To him, the three elements of the Spirit, the baptism, and the passion of Christ '**agree in** witnessing **one** & the same thing (namely that the Son of God is come,)'. They need not become 'manifested' as one being. This is what Newton terms the 'threefold **witnesse of God**'. By acknowledging it, we make Christ's message '**greater**'. However, this 'sense plain & natural' had been 'spoilt' by the 'testimony of the three in heaven'. Newton continues with a commentary on 1 Timothy 3:16, where the phrase 'God was manifest in the flesh' is used by the King James Version. To Newton, this was unnecessarily complex: God was not 'justified in the spirit'—that role belonged to Christ. The Messiah had come to save the Jewish people, among whom he was baptised in the water and the blood. Like most anti-Trinitarians, Newton lamented the association of Jesus Christ with 'God'. In fact, the New Testament only very rarely correlates Christ with God; rarely enough, indeed, for Newton to dismiss the correlation. In this view, the Father is uniquely God; the word 'God' did not refer to his Son, but to the Father. Anything more is 'superfluous'.[20]

What lay behind Newton's anti-Trinitarianism, therefore, was a conviction on two levels. Historically, Scriptural corruptions had been used as a means for Church Fathers and the Roman Catholic Church to enforce doctrinal uniformity from the fourth century onwards. Second, the doctrine of the Trinity had introduced unnecessary complications in the relationship of God with his Son. Rather than accepting the 'mystery of godlinesse', overzealous Church Fathers had introduced concepts more suited to the ancient philosophers and the Schoolmen than to the relationship between God and the Christ. In Newton's thesis, 'western Christians' of the early Church may well have believed that 'the Father, the Son, & the Holy Ghost' were '*signified*' by the 'spirit, the water & the blood'.[21] But the 'testimony of the three in heaven' had not 'yet crept into their books'. While the spirit, water, and blood may have been accepted in the historical period of Christ, the doctrine of the

[18] The *Account* is freely available via the Newton Project: <www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/catalogue/record/THEM00099>.
[19] MS 361/4, f. 24. This passage resembles the hymn of Latin writer Prudentius, 'Corde natus', now known as 'Of the Father's Heart Begotten'.
[20] MS 361/4, f. 32r.
[21] ibid., f. 3r; the italics are mine.

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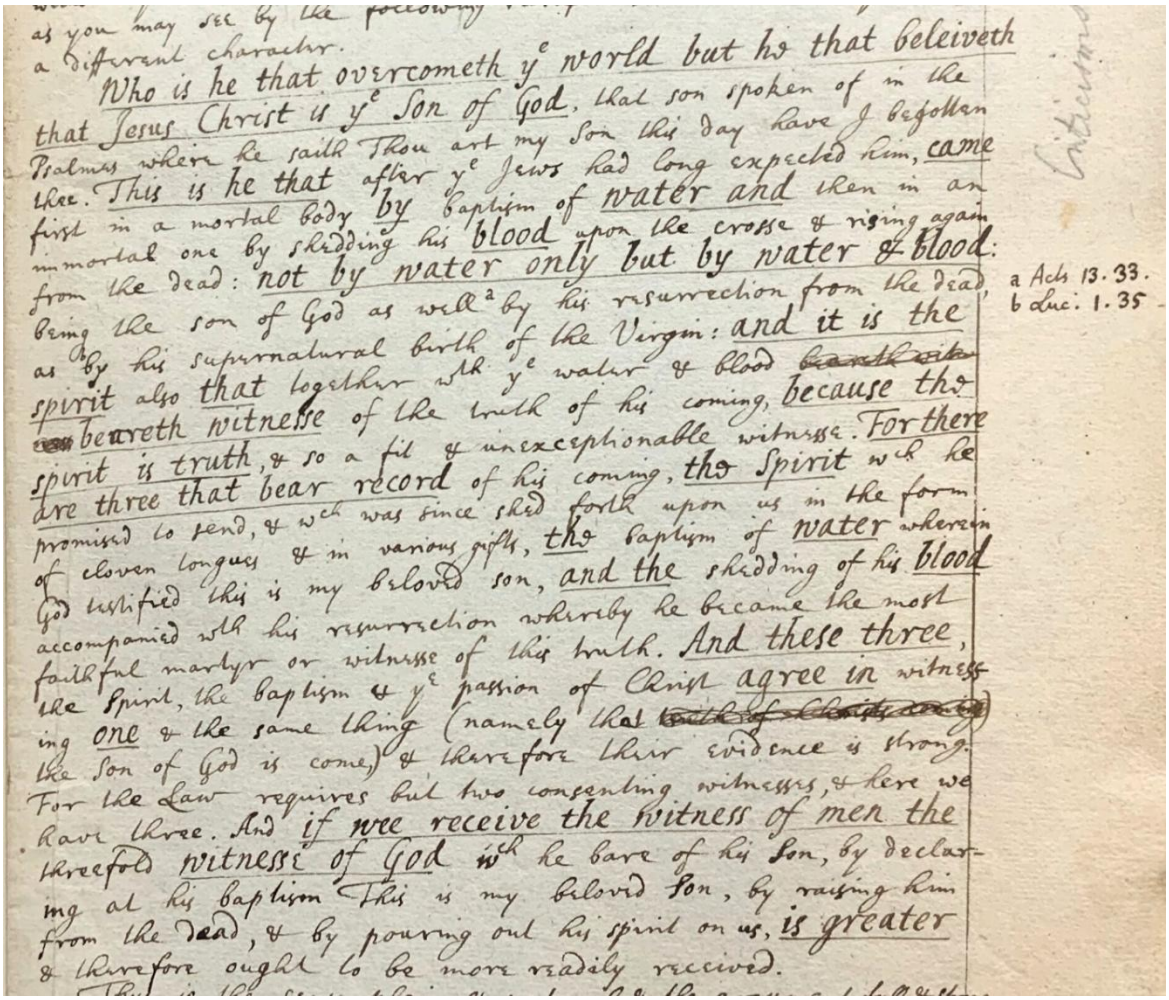
Trinity was an invention of later times. Furthermore, the focus on Christ's role in fulfilling Scripture among the Jewish people in his baptism and passion was straightforward. The consubstantial Trinity was a needless complication.



New College Library, MS 361/4, f. 24 [detail]
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

Historians have often caricatured Newton's most fervent religious writings as the natural produce of an over-productive mind, one unaccustomed to life outside his study at Trinity College, Cambridge. In this view, Newton's self-enforced isolation from society prompted his idiosyncratic readings of Scripture. However, Newton's isolation did not last; by the middle of the 1690s he had made a place for himself in London society, and became Warden of the Royal Mint in 1696. Moreover, Newton's *Account* relied on international sources. He had read Erasmus's writings on the reliability of ancient texts, conversed with John Locke in France on his thesis, and was alive to the work of anti-Trinitarians on the Continent.[22] Though the ferocity of Newton's writings is not in doubt, the relationship of his anti-Trinitarian work to his other lines of intellectual inquiry is perhaps stronger than usually accepted. The scholarly and political contexts of the *Historical Account* strengthened this relationship.

[22] Snobelen, 'To us, there is but one God, the Father'.

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Two things are interesting about the provenance of Newton's work. The first is that he wrote it as a 'Letter to a Friend'—his intellectual fencing partner John Locke. Locke had himself entertained anti-Trinitarian interests ever since a visit to the Parisian Library at St-Germain-des-Prés in 1678.[23] Newton appreciated Locke's attention to what he called, in a rare moment of self-deprecation, his 'mystical fansies'.[24] The second is that Newton intended his letter for publication—something remarkable in the context of the author's religious work. Newton devoted years of his life to a chronology of ancient kingdoms, alchemy, and the Scriptures, but made great efforts for the majority of his work never to see the light of day. Exposure would have eradicated his chances of securing lucrative public office, as well as putting the security of his posting at Trinity College at risk. Yet the opening provided by the Glorious Revolution and the Act of Toleration temporarily convinced Newton that his scholarship would find an appreciative public.[25] He asked Locke to be in contact with the latter's acquaintance John Le Clerc, a controversial French theologian. With Le Clerc's translation of the text into French, Newton envisaged making a crucial intervention on the hot debate on the Trinity in the early 1690s. He would be able to combine his reputation for natural philosophy in the Republic of Letters with his theological views. Time went by, however, and delays in the receipt of letters between the three took momentum from the project. Newton's enthusiasm diminished. The *Account* would not be published for decades after his death—and not received into his body of work until the mid-19th century.

This article has sought to argue for the greater prominence of these New College manuscripts in Newton's work. However, this is not a case for assuming the 'unity' of Newton's œuvre; integrating Newton's theological work into his wider principles should not entail reducing them to pre-supposed maxims. This has not stopped historians of the later 20th century. For example, in 1976, Margaret Jacob linked the promulgation of Newton's 'scientific' ideas with the concerns of 'latitudinarian' churchmen.[26] The links between the *Account* and contemporary religious debates are clear, but it is not so evident that Newton explicitly drew those parallels. Nor is it clear that his theological or natural philosophical work drew any political affiliation. In fact, he made great pains to separate the diverse disciplines in which he was engaged during the 1680s and 1690s.[27]

Yet Newton's desire for theological simplicity is not unique to the *Account*. 'In disputable places', Newton wrote there, 'I love to take up with what I can best understand'.[28] On the other hand, it is the habit of the 'hot and superstitious part of mankind' to be 'ever fond of mysteries.' Although the ways of God may seem mysterious to humans, the truth of God's relationship with mankind was compelling for its very simplicity. This he argued in matters of theology, and in those of natural philosophy. 'For nature is simple and does not indulge in the luxury of superfluous causes', writes Newton in one of the most famous passages of the *Principia*.[29] It would be absurd to claim that Newton applied the same principles of logic to his work in theology, biblical exegesis, and what might anachronistically be termed 'scientific' study. Yet it could be argued that a greater appreciation of the

[23] Peter King, *The Life and Letters of John Locke* (London: Henry Bohn, 1858), p. 81.

[24] Letter of 7 February 1691, in *The Correspondence of John Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), IV, 198–9. The relationship of the two was not always so cordial; in 1693, Newton accused Locke of attempting to 'embroil me with women'. He also told Locke that 'I took you for a Hobbist'—an accusation of some force in the midst of the fierce reception debate and the reputation of the author of *Leviathan* throughout the late 17th century.

[25] Crucially, however, the Act comprehended all Trinitarian Protestants: non-Trinitarians would remain outside the remit of the Church of England until 1813.

[26] Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution: 1689–1720* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).

[27] Rob Iliffe, 'Abstract Considerations: Disciplines and the Incoherence of Newton's Natural Philosophy', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 35 (2004), 427–54.

[28] MS 361/4, f. 25r.

[29] Isaac Newton, *Principia Mathematica* (1687): *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman with Julia Budenz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 794.

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sophistication behind Newton's anti-Trinitarianism more sharply defines the principles shared in his different fields of work.

What were those principles? The first, as we have seen, is historical. In the thesis of the *Account*, the corruption of the Christian church did not begin with the medieval papacy, but with the Church Fathers' scriptural corruptions in the fourth century. In Newton's interpretations of the Book of Revelation, a similar view is propounded: the Roman Church may have been undone by the Reformation, but the Beast and Whore of Babylon foresaw in Revelation had revealed themselves *long before*.[30] This longer perspective of the corruptions of the true Church was a unique characteristic of Newton's exegesis. Similarly, Newton's theology went beyond conventional anti-Catholic rhetoric. Richard Simon and Denis Pétau came to very different conclusions to Newton, but their evidence was of great use to him.

However, I have tried to argue that the theological ramifications of these convictions are what is most significant. Newton's belief that the Trinity was an unnecessary complication of Christ's relationship with God has been viewed by historians as an aberration. We might see it as more consistent: with Newton's fastidious commitment to historical record, and with his insistence on the comprehensibility of God's relationship with mankind. This is not to suggest that Newton's theology and his natural philosophy expose a 'unified' mind, in which his different projects are integrated under one totalising endeavour. Newton's career was idiosyncratic if nothing else. But Newton's lesser-known theological writings underline his view of God's governance of the Earth. 'This Philosophy', he wrote in the *Opticks* (1704), 'brings us not immediately to the Knowledge of the first Cause yet it brings us nearer to it & on that account is to be highly valued'. The same sentence could be the start of the *Historical Account*. That work opens new ways of understanding what one historian has termed Newton's 'assumption of the unity of Truth'.[31] Instead of asking why Newton spent so much time in theological speculation, we should flip modern assumptions on their head. Why did he apply himself to natural philosophy at all, on top of his religious scholarship? Much of the answer to that question lies in the principles of Newton's Christianity. Newton would have us believe that his anti-Trinitarianism brings us closer to his unitary vision of God. If we take Newton's argument for the indivisibility of God to heart, his anti-Trinitarianism is more readily explicable. The motivation behind his pursuit of natural philosophy—in describing the workings of that one God—is perhaps easier to decipher as well.

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[30] See Iliffe, *Priest of Nature*, pp. 293–315.
[31] The phrase is that of Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, as quoted in Iliffe, 'Abstract Considerations', 429.

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