Isaac Newton: A Sermon in Trinity College Chapel

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It is a daunting task to speak here about 'God and some Fellows of Trinity'. God, one is told, may be both merciful and forgiving, but these are attributes that have not always been applied so liberally to Fellows of Trinity. Isaac Newton, about whom it is my duty to talk tonight, represents a particularly troubling challenge. For Newton is present among us, in the guise of the statue which inspired Wordsworth, glimpsing it from his window in John's, to write:

'Of Newton, with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.'

Mercy and forgiveness were not the attributes that first sprang to the lips of Newton's contemporaries, when they considered the marble heart of a man who could be deceitful, vindictive, and ungrateful, as well as decidedly strange. An unforgiving student commented on the *Principia* (published in 1687): 'There goes the man that hath writt a book that neither he nor anybody else understands.' Soon afterwards, those who did claim to understand Newton's book were suggesting that it revealed the secret mechanisms whereby divine will governs the universe. Prominent among these was Richard Bentley, whose own unbending will as Master of Trinity conspicuously failed to govern his own Fellows. In Trinity, if not in the universe, it was not strictly true to echo Pope and intone that 'Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night; God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.' But those who adored Newton seem as troublesome in a moral sphere as those who loathed him. What are we to make of William Stukeley's description of the small coterie of acolytes who 'always took care on Sundays to place ourselves before him [Newton], as he sat with heads of the colleges; we gaz'd on him, never enough satisfy'd, as on somewhat divine'? Stukeley was neither the first nor the last commentator who, astonished at Newton's achievements and the brilliance of his mind, fell into a sort of idolatry.

When required to preach a sermon himself, Newton chose a text from 2 Kings 17:15-16, which describes the apostasy of the Israelites and their worship of Baal. For this, God punished them by giving victory to the Assyrians, leading to the conquest of Samaria, and the end of the northern kingdom of Israel. Newton wrote: 'the words I have chosen to discourse on are a part of the description of the abomination of the Israelites', going on to suggest that 'we have here an opportunity to consider Idolatry in its full latitude & to discourse of its nature in general'.

Idolatry was of pressing concern to Newton for much of his adult life. The quest for the right kind of worship occupied him from the time of one of his earliest writings, a list of sins composed in shorthand, in which his failure to address himself properly to God rubbed shoulders with petty thefts and minor assaults on school fellows and his dreams of carrying out an arson attack on his stepfather's house. Concern about the correct forms to use in worship worried many of Newton's contemporaries, but few were as obsessive in tracing the history of idolatry in the Christian Church. During the years in which he composed the *Principia*, Newton worked continuously on a history of religion. This described the process whereby the worship of kings and heroes supplanted the true worship of God, the creator of all. Here and in later writings, Newton, the astronomer whose work best described the design of the solar system, identified the naming of planets, stars, and constellations as part of the process by which rebellious men turned away from God. Newton contrasted false forms of worship, such as the invocation of saints, with the true form of calling on God through sacrifices made before an eternal flame. His ideal for the building of the Church was quite unlike Trinity College Chapel. It even differed from the Solomonic Temple of Jerusalem, whose shape and size he nevertheless sketched. Instead, it came closest to the model provided by Stonehenge, at the centre of which he believed an altar had stood.

Newton based many of these ideas on a close reading of historical works, both Christian and classical. Yet much of his study focused directly on the text of the Bible itself. The second lesson was taken from the first epistle of John, and it goes to the heart of

Newton's method of working and his beliefs about what had happened to the Christian religion. Newton described what he made of this passage in a letter that he sent to his friend, the philosopher John Locke, concerning 'two notable corruptions of Scripture'. Building on the work of Erasmus and of more recent textual scholars, Newton suggested that the text which now reads 'there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one' had been deliberately altered from its original. The College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity might have fed and housed Newton for thirty-five years, but its name bore witness to a lie.

I hope you will forgive me a quotation setting out Newton's argument. It gives a feel for his thinking and his style, as well as for his obsessive desire to sweep up all the possible guilty parties into a single chronicle of ignominy.

> The history of the corruption in short is this. First some of the Latines interpreted the spirit water & blood of the Father, Son & Holy ghost to prove them one. Then Jerome for the same end inserted the Trinity in express words into his Version. Out of him the Africans began to allege it against the Vandals about 64 years after his death. Afterwards the Latines noted his variations in the margins of their books, and thence it began at length to creep into the text in transcribing, & that chiefly in the twelft & following Centuries when disputing was revived by the Schoolmen. And when printing came up it crept out of the Latine into the printed Greek against the authority of all the greek MSS & ancient Versions; & from the Venetian presses it went soon after into Greece.

Newton was a careful scholar of the traces that God's finger had left on the page, as well as those which testified to his activity in the heavens. The evidence from both sources pointed to the evil worked by idolatry, in this case the spread throughout the Church of the false doctrine of the Trinity, which mistakenly equated Christ and the Holy Ghost with God the Father Almighty. Greek philosophy, Latin hunger for power, and medieval scholastic obfuscation had all contributed to an error which left God's Church in tatters and made it practically impossible for ordinary people to know what God wanted and how they should worship him. Identifying the hand of God in the heavens might lead people to be suitably in awe of him, but by itself it could not explain what they should then do.

Despite his doubts about the nature of Christ's person, Newton's interpretation of his message was straightforward. The true religion consisted of love of God and of one's neighbour, but Churches, creeds, and other falsehoods had come between most people and understanding or practice of this simple faith. It was the task of a remnant, among whom Newton counted himself, to bring humanity back from idolatry to faithfulness. When this would happen was hard to tell, that it would happen had been foretold by God himself. The first lesson contained what Newton and many others called 'the prophecy of the seventy weeks.' For Newton's contemporaries, the phrase 'seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins… and to anoint the most Holy' provided 'a Little Provincial Kalendar, containing the time that the Legal worship and Iewish state was to continue from the rebuilding of the Sanctuary… until the final destruction thereof', as Joseph Mede, a Christ's man, put it. Newton himself could not accept interpretations of prophecy that cast the historical Christ as the end of Judaism or the beginning of a new system of atonement. For him, the seventy weeks lasted longer than this and Christ remained, like Daniel, a prophet even if he was also 'Messiah, the prince' and the high priest who might mediate between God and his people. The most important events that Daniel foretold lay in the future, rather than the past, in the completion of the work of prophecy that would see the Jews return to Palestine, the culmination of the struggle with Antichrist, and the establishment of God's kingdom for the saints on earth.

Newton was not an original student of prophecy, and he never quite decided what he should make of its most obscure figures. But what mattered to him was that the Bible revealed, through the historical fulfilment of prophecy, the activity of God in human affairs. Like divine activity in the physical working of the universe, God's interventions in history had a pattern to them. Human history would continue as long as God chose to sustain it, but the long-term future for the proper worship of God might lie on other planets with different stories. Whether or not human beings would know anything about this depended on the survival of their souls, which Newton tended to think slept, perhaps for ever, after death. The handful of saints who would rule with Christ in the future

commanded a millennial kingdom of mortal people. Their resurrection might itself be limited in time to the period of that kingdom and the return of its harsh judge.

The literal meaning of Scripture can support many strange messages. In Newton's hands, it seems at once both strikingly modern and sophisticated in its textual conclusions and shockingly old-fashioned and limited in its view of the Christian message, past, present and future. The God whom Newton brought to light was and is a hard taskmaster to whom humanity owed the duty of worship as a creature, in return for which men and women received no rights or expectations and precious little hope. It is possible for the historian to explain why Newton thought this way, but even so it is hard not to feel some shock that he did so.

Newton's orthodox contemporaries were certainly shocked. A mid-eighteenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Secker, pointed out that Newton 'did not learn his System of Christianity from his System of Philosophy: nor was he the same great man in the Interpretation of Scripture as of Nature'. Many more recent commentators have been dismayed not at the content of Newton's religion but by the fact that he seemed to be so interested in things like the literal fulfillment of prophecy. For some it was good that Newton could be said to be pious; for others, piety seemed to imply infirmity of mind or spirit. Yet when we consider Newton, we need to bear in mind not just that he believed but what he believed. If it leaves us feeling cold and afraid, that is because Newton believed that people should be afraid of and in awe of God. Eighteenth-century commentators on the wonders of creation found this too stark a message, but to a modern ear, Newton's idea of God resonates with the fears and doubts of generations of later writers. Although Newton's style, his personality, his writing can often seem so strong that it must smack of arrogance, does not the bleakness of the rejection of the past and the confrontation with the uncertainty of the future present in his writing lead one to see something humble there as well?

When Wordsworth wrote of Newton's statue, gregariously placed in the antechapel here, he sensed at once the loneliness of Newton. This is a burden that all human beings share.

Newton did not really offer any cure for it, since he believed that the most essential common activity, human worship of God, required the further reformation of religion. Yet, at the same time, Newton argued that set forms and creeds were irrelevant: let us hope therefore that our worship this evening can melt the marble heart, if not of the statue, then of living people who are in need and perhaps even of Isaac Newton's God.

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