THE IMAGE OF GOD AND THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD: ISAAC NEWTON ON RELIGION AND IDOLATRY

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Abstract: *In this paper I propose to explore the source of Newton's anti-animism, as well as the consequences (theological and historical) presented by him. To begin with, the reason of the Newtonian anti-animism is the ancient idolatry, not only its religious aspect, but also the philosophical component it generates. Thus, the conditions in which the ancient idolatry is born and its consequences on the conception of the physical universe will constitute the subject of the first part of this paper. Secondly, the way in which this idolatry corrupts the radical monotheism of primitive Christianity and the religious consequences of this process will be discussed in the second part of this article.*

Keywords: *Newton, idolatry, antitrinitariansim.*

The second edition of Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (1713) contains a general conclusion (Scholium Generale) about the system of planets and the monarchical character of God. This theologically charged appendix is still a source of fascination to those interested in Newton's religious writings. Thousands of manuscript folios on Church history, biblical prophecies or the corruption of the original religion were written by the English natural philosopher. Many of the ideas represented in an oblique fashion in the General Scholium relate to ideas detailed in much more explicit ways in his private papers. Scholars may speculate both a tendency of religious and theological iconoclasm in Newton's writings, this could be the reason for his radical agnosticism regarding the divine nature and, consequently, for an antitrinitarian conception. As we delve deeper into this topic, there are two constant threads which can be observed in some of Isaac Newton's papers (be them published or unpublished, on natural philosophy or theology), namely a non-metaphysical approach and a physical-theological agnosticism.

Newton on the Origin of Idolatry

In the addenda to the second edition of *Principia*, Newton lays out his conception about the God of dominion in opposition to the understanding of the Deity as the soul of the world, "non ut Anima mundi" (Newton, 1713: 482). This antianimistic statement reveals the matter of the interaction of God with nature. Newton concludes that God acts in the world as *Pantokrator* or *Imperator universalis*, and this could be possible due to his substantial omnipresence.[46] His antianimism, including its religious connotations, is developed in the historical writings about the origins of civilization. The original philosophical religion shared by the entire humankind in the first post-

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[46]"He [God] rules all things, not as the world soul but as the lord of all. And because of his dominion he is called Lord God *Pantokrator* (That is, universal ruler). [...] He is omnipresent not only *virtually* but also *substantially*; for action requires substance [*lit.* for active power [virtus] cannot subsist without substance]." (Newton, 1999: 940-941)

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diluvian generations has been corrupted by animist cosmological theosophies which gave birth to different idolatrous cults (Buchwald, Feingold, 2012: 127-163). In a manuscript from the early 1690s, Newton presents in detail the results of his research on the original religion and its alteration process.

> The most ancient and most widespread religion in the first ages was that of the Prytanea or the Vestal Temples. This was diffused across all nations until the first memory of things (Yahuda MS 41, 1^{r}).

This revealed religion received and spread after the Flood by Noah and his sons contained some essential elements concerning the understanding of the physical world. The temples of Prytanea were built around a fire as a symbol of heliocentrism. As such, investigating nature also had a religious dimension, that of worshiping the Creator, whose omnipresence constituted the main philosophical truth about the God–universe relationship.[47] To Newton, the religion of Prytanea was the primordial philosophical religion by reason of its universality: it was not preceded by any other religion and no subsequent religion presented so wide an expansion (from Egypt to Scandinavia and from Britain to China) without the support of a military power (Yahuda MS 41, 3^{r-v}). This true and primitive philosophical religion of Prytanea had been designed through "the frame of ancient temples" to preserve and transmit the very religious and natural philosophical truths about God and nature. In other words, it was "the most rational of all others till the nations corrupted it" (Yahuda 41, 7^{r}). The original religion was in fact a natural religion whereby the image of natural world was the image of God's creation.

> So then twas one designe of the first institution of the true religion to propose to mankind by the frame of the ancient Temples, the study of the frame of the world as the true Temple of the great God they worshipped. And thence it was that the Priests anciently were above other men well skilled in the knowledge of the true frame of Nature & accounted it a great part of their Theology (Yahuda MS 41, 7r).

Beyond the assertion of the Creator's omnipresence, the primitive philosophical religion was establishing a clear agnosticism on how God acts in the world. The corruption of the religion promoted by Noah's sons was brought about precisely by a lack of a proper understanding of the ubiquity of the one true God. The ancient idolatry started with the worship of celestial bodies, sprung from a tendency to honour ancestors (Yahuda 41, 8^{r}). The ancient named stars, towns or rivers after their ancestors, heroes and founders of cities. Firmly convinced that the spirits of their ancestors dwell in the stars, not only the authentic religion was corrupted, but also the primitive astrology (Yahuda 41, 9^{r-v}). Celestial bodies were endowed with human qualities and virtues, and the new gods were praised in Prytanea along with the real Creator, receiving as a justification of their deity the name of the only true God (Yahuda 41, 10^{v}). A lengthy process of animating the physical universe leads to the birth of new animistic theosophies which, along with the steady rise of the ancient idolatries, provide an opportunity to the development of some metaphysical concepts about the world. These new feigned cosmologies partly relied on some of the philosophical truths of Prytanea, such as the necessity of the divine intervention in the natural world, heliocentrism, gravity or the inverse-square law. But most importantly they altered the

[47] "The whole heavens they recconed to be the true & real Temple of God & therefore that a Prytanæum might deserve the name of his Temple they framed it so as in the fittest manner to represent the whole systeme of the heavens." (Yahuda MS 41, 6r)

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understanding of God's presence in the world by animist doctrines, something recognized by Newton as *anima mundi*. As such, for Thales, God becomes the mind of the world (Yahuda 17.1, 10^{v}), Pythagoras conceived of a unity between God and nature and he taught on the transmigration of spirits in the celestial bodies, the Stoics believed that the heavens were parts of Jupiter and that the creation was alive and had reason, while the Platonists considered the stars as being the purest creatures (Yahuda 17.3, 12^{v}). If the priests had the task to conserve and pass on the whole of Prytanea's knowledge (Yahuda 41, 7^{r}), they are also the ones on whom the blame is cast for its corruption and the spreading of the new theosophical doctrines. Having started in Egypt, this idolatrous process was extended to Mesopotamia and Greece (CUL MS 3965, ff. 328-89, 654-656). Religion, hieroglyphs and the images of the Egyptian gods are for Newton the proof of their commitment to heliocentrism. The religious ceremony was in fact a method to express the science of the heavens. Regarding the origins of atomism, Newton believes that Moschus the Phoenician is the source of the pre-Aristotelians such as Democritus, Heraclitus or Pythagoras. In this way, we can retrace the transmission path of the concept "all matter consists of atoms" (CUL MS 3965.6, 270; Buchwald, Feingold, 2012: 145). Most importantly, we can find the latter information in drafts of natural philosophical writings. In a manuscript intended for the 1717 edition of the correspondence between Leibniz and Clarke, after a criticism of the Cartesian understanding of God's omnipresence, Newton asserts the substantial omnipresence and rejects any metaphysical approach in natural philosophy.

> Metaphysics originates from the ancient Theogony of the Gentiles, where the Gentiles were everywhere feigning that the Sun, the Moon, the stars, the elements, intelligences, humane souls, animals, and everything which is in nature are either parts of the highest God or either His powers. From this it follows that nature herself is the highest God. In this philosophy, the Gentiles founded their idolatry. And Moses, by abolishing [this] cult of parts of the world, condemned this philosophy and established Lord God as omnipresent and distinct from nature. (CUL MS 9597.2.14, f. 4^{r} translated in Ducheyne, 2012: 261-262)

Just as I stated in the beginning of this paper, any attempt to explain the divine ubiquity and the way in which God acts in the world represent an exercise beyond the boundaries of both natural philosophy and revelation, "for there is no way (without revelation) to come to the knowledge of a Deity but by the frame of Nature" (Yahuda MS 41, 7^{r}). And for Newton this process bears the name of metaphysics. Against Prytanea's agnosticism, the ancient idolatrous theosophies have developed metaphysical conceptions of God and the universe. Aiming to combat these doctrines Moses re-established the teaching of Noah (of the old Prytanea) about a God of dominion, omnipresent in his creation. This particular type of agnosticism regarding the precise manner in which God acts in the physical world can be found in General Scholium, where the source of gravitation is discussed (Newton, 1999: 943).[48]

There are three essential similarities observed between the General Scholium and Newton's stance on primitive religion and its corruption: the antianimistic statement, the understanding of the substantial omnipresence, and the agnostic feature of natural philosophy concerning God's *modus operandi*. Newton's 1717 *Opticks* ends

[48]"I have not as yet been able to deduce from phenomena the reason for these properties of gravity, and I do not "feign" hypotheses. For whatever is not deduced from phenomena must be called a hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, or based on occult qualities, or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy." (Newton, 1999: 943)

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with a resonating query about the development of natural philosophy, emphasising that even from ancient times the practice of (true) philosophy was integral to the domain of "sacred philosophy" (Yahuda MS 16, 1^{r}). Despite its idolatry, the ancient philosophy has a religious goal, to worship the true Creator of all things.[49] Here Newton aims also at the modern metaphysical philosophies, which, by excluding God from nature, prove to be a path towards atheism. But metaphysical conceptions are not only the result of the primitive religion corruption, but they have also altered the original Christian doctrine.

On the Monarchian Side: Newton's Antitrinitarian Theology

Newton's antitrinitarian theology was developed on the investigation of ancient historical and theological sources. For Newton, ancient doctrinal sources enjoyed greater authority than contemporary ones. In accordance with the ante-Nicene Fathers, he establishes the divinity of the Father and the Son on the basis of the criterion of *dominion*, thus dispensing with "metaphysical speculations" (ousia, homousios, hypostasis). Most of his own religious statements can be dated after 1700. His theological language is stereotypical and abounds in compilations or paraphrases of biblical verses, because "all the old Heresies lay in deductions, the true faith was in the text" (Yahuda MS 15.1, f. 11^{r}). For Newton the unaltered form of the Christian doctrine precedes the Arian dispute, because the theological confrontation of the fourth century is characterized by the corruption of the theological language faithful to the Scriptures by concepts originating in the pagan philosophy and theology. This phenomenon begins at the end of the second century and reaches its peak in the fourth century.

> the metaphysical Theology of Orpheus Plato & other heathen Philosophers began to spread \manifestly/ in the churches before the end of the second century, & infected not only those who separated from her & became hereticks of note, but also many others who did not separate, & particularly that it insinuated it self into the Churches of Antioch & Rome & the scool at Alexandria. And therefore we need not wonder if it still got grownd in the third century & prevailed in the fourth. (Sotheby Lot MS 255.2, f. 2^{r})

In his theological and historical analysis, Newton establishes an important methodological criterion, to keep separately theology and philosophy: "That religion & Philosophy are to be preserved distinct. We are not to introduce divine revelations into Philosophy, nor philosophical opinions into religion" (Keynes MS 6, f. 1^{r}). Distortion of the original Christian teaching was caused by the intrusion of metaphysical philosophy, Gnostic and Cabalistic opinions, by the imprudent acceptance of foreign scholars inside the Church.

> [Many] writers of the first ages is to be looked upon as not derived from the Apostles by tradition but unwarily brought into the Church from the Theology of the heathens or Cabbalists in w^{ch} learned men happened to be \educated &/ instructed before they became

[49]"For so far as we can know by Natural Philosophy what is the first Cause, what Power he has over us, and what Benefits we receive from him, so far our Duty towards him, as well as that towards one another, will appear to us by the Light of Nature. And no doubt, if the Worship of false Gods had not blinded the Heathen, their moral Philosophy would have gone farther than to the four Cardinal Virtues; and instead of teaching the Transmigration of Souls, and to worship the Sun and Moon, and dead Heroes, they would have taught us to worship our true Author and Benefactor." (Newton, 1718: 381-382)

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> Christians, or from the Theology of the hereticks who by their emissaries endeavoured to corrupt the Church. (Yahuda MS 15.2, f. 38^{r}. See also ff. 28^{v}, 32^{v}, 42^{r})

The effect of mixing Christian theology with pagan philosophy reaches its peak in the dispute between Arius and Athanasius. In Newton's view, the two Alexandrines proposed a theological language in which speculation and innovative concepts altered the original content of Christian belief.

> The Greek|s| to preserve the Church from these innovations & metaphysical perplexitys & put an end to the troubles occasioned by them anathematized the \novel/ language of Arius in several of their Councils, & so soon as they were able repealed the novel language of the homousians, & contended that the language of the scripture was to be adhered unto. (Yahuda MS 15.7, f. 154^{r})

In Newton's unpublished papers God is conceived in relation to his creation as Monarch of the universe – which constitutes his dominion (monarchy) – and this is the proper character of God; from this it follows that Deity is conceived as the dominion of God. Even in the General Scholium, Newton states that "godhood (deitas) is the lordship of God" (Newton, 1999: 940). All this with the aim of preserving God's oneness using the monarchial criterion of dominion, which ensures both the unity of the Deity, and the real and active (*substantial*, in Newton) presence of the Creator in his creation.

The reconstruction of Newton's conception of the Godhead has as a starting point the hypothesis I advanced before in this paper, that simple truths of early Christianity have been corrupted with metaphysical distinctions and abstractions of Hellenic philosophy and Gnostic thought. Speaking about lack of consensus regarding the character of the Logos in the ancient Church, Newton writes: "By these instances it is manifest that Pla\to/nism began to spread much in the Churches before y^{e} end of y^{e} second century. And therefore we need not wonder if it prevailed in y^{e} fourth." (Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 87^{v}) Moreover, the "novel language" Athanasians and Arians have been charged for abuses some categories improper to scriptural language. This approach was not short of consequences in regard to the expression of the divine unity between the Father and the Son, consecrated in the Church of the first centuries as a unity of dominion, therefore a Monarchian unity.

> Arius & Athanasius had both of them perplexed the Church with metaphysical opinions & expressed their opinions in novel language not warranted by scripture. [...] the Greek Churches rejected all metaphysical divinity as well that of Arius as that of the Homousians & made the father & son one God by a Monarchical unity, an unity of Dominion. (Yahuda MS 15.7, f. 154^{r})

Here, Newton confirms the monarchian criterion of the unity of the Deity, the principle of dominion. The Son and the Father are divine, because they rule together over the same *dominion*. Athanasian Trinitarianism or Arius' *trias* distorts this conception of the unity between the Father and the Son, at the same time altering the monotheistic essence of Christianity. According to Newton, in order to explain the idea of consubstantiality between the Father and the Son, Trinitarians resort to a metaphysical "conceptual pair" (οὐσία - ὁμοούσιος) forbidden by the Scripture. In a manuscript dated after 1710, Newton comes up with seven reasons against the use of these philosophical terms, such as: it would give rise to the possibility of conceiving the Logos as an emanation from the being of the Father, the word *homousios* is nowhere to be found in the Bible, therefore it is not revealed, or this term is ambiguous and it leaves

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room for interpretation. (Yahuda MS 15.1, ff. 7^{r}-11^{r}) Taking this analysis as a starting point, Newton brings to discussion the fact that the origins of the Arian controversy are to be found in Gnostic concepts and he assimilates the language of the Homoousians to a heretical tradition.

> this language was first used by hereticks such as were the Cataphrygians & Sabellians. It was their language & \was/ condemned by the \ancient/ Church, & gave occasion to the Arian controversy. (*ibidem*, f. 9^{r})

Talking about the nature of God or conceiving the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of substance (either consubstantial or subordinated to one-another) lead inevitably to idolatry. Such a language denotes remnants of pagan religions that penetrated Christianity through the Gnostic currents.

> The heathens & \Gnosticks supposed/ not only their Gods but even the souls of men \& the stars to be/ of one substance w^{th} the supreme God \& yet were Idolaters for worshipping them/. (Yahuda MS 15.5, f. 98^{v})

To consider that the stars or souls of humans (i.e. creation) are of one substance with the Creator represents the expression of pagan idolatry. Similarly, the worship of Christ motivated by his consubstantiality with the Father distinguishes itself by no means from idolatry, even if Christ is considered a divine being created before the world or nothing more than a mere human. Consubstantiality is not to be confounded with dominion (the only valid principle for honouring God and Christ), but it negates the worship of the Father and transforms it into a form of idolatry.

> And \he/ that is of this opinion may beleive Christ to be of one substance with the father without making him more then a meer man. Tis not consubstantiality but power & dominion w^{ch} gives a right to be worshipped. And to worship a consubstantial being \wholy/ destitute of power & dominion \is/ worshipping a vanity & by consequence idolatry. (*ibidem*)

Founding his argument on this premise, Newton questions the introduction and validation of *homousios* in the synods of the Church (once, the ground for Paul of Samosata's excommunication) and tries to retrace the history of the doctrinal problem generated by the terms *ousia*, *homousious*, *homoiusios*, *hypostasis* etc. To Newton, Christ can be worshipped in respect of the power and dominion received from the Father for his redeeming sacrifice. (Yahuda MS 15.7, 154^{r}, SL255.7, 2^{r}) Firstly, Newton complains that *homousios* was introduced against the convictions of the majority of the Synod in Nicaea, since this term was adopted in order to oppose the conceptions of Arius. The adoption of this term was approved through the intercession of Emperor Constantine I, not yet baptized in the year 325 and not yet having the quality of a council member. Additionally, the mistranslation of the term *homousios* into Latin by Hosius (*unius substantiae* instead of *consubstantialis*) led to such misunderstanding of the Council of Nicaea in the West, that the Eastern Churches were charged of Arianism by the West and the Western Churches were charged of Sabellianism by the East. To the Greeks, the avoidance of the confusion between natures was done by the use of *hypostasis*, a term similar to the Latin *substantia.* Thus, the consequence of such misunderstanding generated the theory of consubstantiality, which is formulated for the first time with regard to the three divine Persons during the reign of Julian the Apostate, an admirer of pagan cults (Keynes MS 11, f. 1^{r}). Thus, Newton explains the process of corrupting original Christian monotheism by employing ontological categories supplied by ancient philosophy.

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Newton's antitrinitarianism becomes a source for his iconoclasm since the divinity of Christ is not ontological. In this way, we repeatedly find in the theological manuscripts of the natural philosopher statements against the cult of images. One of the reminiscences of polytheist cults in Christianity was precisely the cult of images (Yahuda MS 11, 6^{r}-7^{r}). In a manuscript dating from the time of the General Scholium, Newton was firmly classifying this practice as an idolatrous sin.

> [T]he sin of Idolatry consists in making & worshipping the images of dead men or of other things in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the waters below the earth that is of birds beasts or fishes (contrary to the second commandment) upon a supposition that by virtue of the souls of dead men or of the supreme God or any other Spirits or Demons good or bad inhabiting them or upon any other account they can hear & see their worshippers or do them good or hurt. To ascribe such powers to them is to feign them Gods (such Gods as the heathens worshipped) & to love or feare or trust in them or express such love feare or trust by prayers praises thanksgivings sacrifices adorations or any other outward action or service is the idolatry of the old heathens forbidden in the second commandment (Keynes MS 7, 1^{v}).

This being the situation, the biblical verse by which the Son is identified as "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) has for Newton a spiritual meaning, without having an ontological content associated (Keynes MS 2, 5^{r}, 12^{r}). However, to recover the authentic Christian belief requires a dialectical opposition between biblical doctrine and pagan idolatry, which in turn reveals the metaphysical encroachments.

Conclusion

There are many theological insights in Newton's natural philosophical papers. In the succinct and comprehensive text of the General Scholium, we can observe particular references regarding his agnosticism, antitrinitarianism or a non-metaphysical approach. Newton's agnosticism regarding the way in which God acts in the world is expressed when he discusses the source of gravity. On the one hand, the substantial omnipresence of God is a principle of action in the world, "for action requires substance" and in God "all things are contained and move".[50] On the other hand, the precise manner in which Divinity acts in the physical universe remains unknown,[51] since it cannot be perceived by studying natural phenomena: "I have not as yet been able to deduce from phenomena the reason for these properties of gravity, and I do not feign hypotheses" (Newton, 1999: 943). On the antianimism professed in the Scholium I made some remarks in the first part of the paper. The Newtonian definition about God as Lord of the universe required the antianimist statement "non ut Anima mundi." Against an animist conception of Divinity, Newton proposes a biblical conception of *God Pantokrator* (a term borrowed most likely from the Book of Revelation, the most frequently quoted by Newton). When mentioning "the blind metaphysical necessity",

[50]"He is omnipresent, not only *virtually* but also *substantially*; for action requires substance [*lit.* for active power [virtus] cannot subsist without substance]. In him all things are contained and move, but he does not act on them nor they on him. God experiences nothing from the motion of bodies; the bodies feel no resistance from God's omnipresence." (Newton, 1999: 942-943)

[51]"It is agreed that the supreme God necessarily exists, and by the same necessity he is *always* and *everywhere*. It follows that all of him is like himself: he is all eye, all ear, all brain, all arm, all force of sensing, of understanding, and of acting, but in a way not at all human, in a way not at all corporeal, in a way utterly unknown to us." (*ibidem*: 942)

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Newton alludes to the Cartesian hypothetical method. The anti-Cartesian approach can be easily noticed even from the beginning of the Scholium, when he criticizes the theory of vortices. Newton's desideratum not to introduce hypotheses in natural philosophy is built in opposition to the Cartesian tradition, to which he associates the label of metaphysical philosophy (Ducheyne, 2012: 253-263).

Regarding the antitrinitarian overtones, two years after the publication of the second edition of the *Principia*, the first theological criticism was made against the new addenda from 1713. The Calvinist cleric John Edwards, in a polemical work against Samuel Clarke's *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), labelled the short Newtonian appendix as an antitrinitarian text. Therefore, the former President of the Royal Society was associated both with the Socinianism of Johannes Crellius and with the Arianism of William Whiston (Snobelen, 2001: 192-196). Edwards' reasons were the use of the term "God" as a relative word (which does not denote the essence of Divinity, but his office as the supreme Governor) and the formula "Deus summus," which, following the ancient Arian doctrine, denoted the subordination of Christ to the Father (Edwards, 1714: 37-40). More than that, regarding the divine substance, Newton expresses again his agnosticism, "we have ideas of his attributes, but we certainly do not know what is the substance of any thing" (Newton, 1999: 942).

Therefore, Isaac Newton developed a specific agnosticism regarding the relationship between God and the physical world. From the natural phenomena, Newton states in his *Principia*, we can postulate God's permanent activity in the world, but we cannot know how it is performed. This kind of natural philosophical agnosticism is the source of Newton's rejection of any metaphysical explanation of the world and Scripture, namely, his antianimism and antitrinitarianism.

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