

Was Isaac Newton an Arian?

Thomas C. Pfizenmaier

Historians of Newton's thought have been wide ranging in their assessment of his conception of the trinity. David Brewster, in his *The Life of Sir Isaac Newton* (1831), was fully convinced that Newton was an orthodox trinitarian, although he recognized that "a traditional belief has long prevailed that Newton was an Arian."¹ Two reasons were used to defend his conclusion that Newton was orthodox. The first was a letter from John Craig, a friend of Newton, written shortly after Newton's death to John Conduitt, the husband of Newton's niece. In this letter Craig remarked that Newton's theological opinions "were sometimes different from those which are commonly received" but that he hoped Conduitt would publish Newton's theological papers, "that the world may see that Sir Isaac Newton was as good a Christian as he was a mathematician and philosopher."² The second reason with which Brewster defended his conclusion was his acknowledgment that the doctrine of the trinity itself had variations.

I had no hesitation when writing the Life of Sir Isaac Newton in 1830, in coming to the conclusion that he was a believer in the Trinity; and in giving this opinion on the creed of so great a man, and so indefatigable a student of scripture, I was well aware that there are various forms of Trinitarian truth, and various modes of expressing it, which have been received as orthodox in the purest societies of the Christian Church.³

L. T. More in his biography *Isaac Newton* gently chided Brewster for not publishing some of the crucial manuscripts, which eventually became

¹ David Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton* (2 vols.; Edinburgh, 1860), II, 339, citing Dr. Thompson (*History of the Royal Society*, 284), that Newton did not believe in the trinity.

² *Ibid.*, II, 316.

³ *Ibid.*, II, 340.

part of the Keynes collection.⁴ From these additional manuscripts More reached the conclusion that Newton was not orthodox but an Arian. He proceeded to say that Newton was not only an Arian but, because of the manner in which he understood Jesus' role as prophet, a Unitarian.⁵

More recently the famous British economist John M. Keynes, who considered it a great "impiety" that the Portsmouth family's collection of Newton's non-scientific manuscripts were dispersed at the Sotheby's auction in 1936 and who recovered about half of them creating the "Keynes" collection at Cambridge, provided yet a third interpretation of Newton's thought.

Very early in life Newton abandoned orthodox belief in the Trinity. At this time the Socinians were an important Arian sect amongst intellectual circles. It may be that Newton fell under Socinian influences, but I think not. He was rather a Judaic monotheist of the school of Maimonides. He arrived at this conclusion, not on so-to-speak rational or skeptical grounds, but entirely on the interpretation of ancient authority. He was persuaded that the revealed documents give no support to the Trinitarian doctrines which were due to late falsifications. The revealed God was one God.⁶

Among contemporary scholars, the consensus is that Newton was an Arian rather than a Socinian.⁷ This view is clearly expressed by Richard

⁴ Louis Trenchard More, *Isaac Newton: A Biography 1642-1727* (New York, 1934), 631.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁶ J. M. Keynes, "Newton the Man" in *The Royal Society Newton Tercentenary Celebrations 15-19 July 1946* (Cambridge, 1947), 27-34. This was a lecture prepared by J. M. Keynes, who died before it was to be delivered. It was read to the Society by Mr. Geoffrey Keynes, who offers a tantalizing invitation to consider Newton not as "the first of the age of reason," but rather as the "last of the magi," and argues that Newton saw the world as a "riddle" or "cryptogram set by the Almighty." This is all the more an intriguing approach for those who live in a time when Stephen Hawking, who holds Newton's Lucasian chair at Cambridge and was born on the anniversary of Newton's birth, is seeking the holy grail of the Unified Theory.

⁷ See Richard Westfall, "The Rise of Science and Decline of Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Kepler, Descartes, and Newton" in *God and Nature*, eds. D. Lindberg and R. Numbers (Berkeley, 1986), 230; James Force, "The Newtonians and Deism" in *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht, 1990), 60; Richard Popkin, "Newton as a Bible Scholar" in *Essays on the Context, Nature and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology*, eds. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht, 1990), 107; Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, tr. John C. Bowden (London, 1984), 341; Gale E. Christianson, *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times* (New York, 1984), 249; Derek Gjertsen, *The Newton Handbook* (London, 1986), 591. Gjertsen seems to have taken his taxonomy of trinitarian belief from L.T. More (630 n. 41).

Westfall who writes, “Well before 1675, Newton had become an Arian in the original sense of the term. He recognized Christ as a divine mediator between God and man, who was subordinate to the Father who created him.”⁸ Yet Frank Manuel, in his *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (1974), advises that we not try to push Newton into a theological categorization too quickly. He reminds us that Newton was, if nothing else, an original thinker.

It is an error to seize upon his antitrinitarianism in order to pigeonhole him in one of the recognized categories of heresy—Arian, Socinian, Unitarian, or Deist.⁹

So how did Isaac Newton conceive of the trinity? In exploring his writing on the subject we will be guided by two principles mentioned above. The first is Brewster’s insight that the trinitarian doctrine has in fact been understood with a certain degree of variety within the sphere of orthodoxy. The second is from Manuel’s reminder, that we must resist the temptation to make Newton “fit” some predetermined category or school of trinitarian thought. We will begin by looking at the resources available for studying Newton’s thought on the trinity.

Newton wrote at least one million words on theology and scripture and perhaps much more.¹⁰ A large part of the corpus deals either directly or indirectly with the trinity. There are a number of folio pages in the Yahuda collection which treat the history of the early church during the time of the Council of Nicaea.¹¹ Many of these pages center on the derivation of early

⁸ Richard Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge, 1980), 315.

⁹ Frank Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford, 1974), 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-10. The bulk of Newton’s non-scientific manuscripts were sold at an auction by Sotheby’s in 1936. The Portsmouth collection was divided into three main groups: the Yahuda collection is in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, the Keynes collection is in the King’s College Library, Cambridge Univ., and the Babson Collection, until recently held in the Babson College Library in Wellesley Massachusetts, has been transferred to the Dibner Institute at M.I.T. (Reventlow, 589, n. 4; see Christianson, 251). Several of the more important documents for determining Newton’s trinitarian views include: “Argumenta and Twelve Points on Arian Christology”—some extracts to be found in L.T. More, *Isaac Newton*, 642, and Richard Westfall, *Never at Rest*, 315-16. Published works on the subject include: Isaac Newton, *Two Letters of Isaac Newton to Mr. LeClerc* (London, 1754; more easily found in Isaac Newton, *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, ed. Alfred R. Hall and Laura Tilling (Cambridge, 1976), III, 83-144 as “An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions.” For a full inventory of the manuscripts see Richard Westfall, “Newton’s Theological Manuscripts” in *Contemporary Newtonian Research*. ed. Zev Bechler (Dordrecht, 1982), 141-43.

¹¹ Yahuda MSS. 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 5.3, 11, 12, 14, 15, 19, 22, and 29 (Richard Westfall, “Newton’s Theological Manuscripts,” 141-43).

trinitarian theology as reflected in quotations from the early Fathers, and Newton's notes on prophecy also address this issue. In the same collection there is a Latin version of the first part of the "Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture."¹² In the Babson Collection there is a Latin text on the theology of Athanasius, a discourse on true religion, and a short fragment with a note on the history of the early church.¹³ The long Bodmer manuscript on the history of the Church likely has the trinity as a focal area, if Newton's other notes on the early Church are any indication. A number of useful manuscripts come from the Keynes collection at Cambridge. MS. 2 is a theological notebook that contains scriptural citations which begin by following a quasi-credal structure and then transition to a series of subject headings.¹⁴ Also contained in this manuscript are two sections in Latin on the trinity which are primarily citations drawn from the Fathers. Finally there are some brief notes on the terms *homoousia*, *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *substantia*, and *personis*. MS. 4 is a number of pages of notes from Petavius's *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*.¹⁵ MS. 6 is seven points on religion and MS. 8 is twelve articles on religion. MS. 9 is a series of sheets on true religion.¹⁶ MS. 10 is entitled *Paradoxical Questions concerning the morals and actions of Athanasius and his Followers*.¹⁷ MS. 11 is entitled *Quaeries Regarding the word ὁμοούσιος*.¹⁸ There is also an important manuscript at the Clark Library (Los Angeles) titled, "Paradoxical questions concerning the morals and actions of Athanasius & his followers" which is much longer and more extensive than Keynes MS.10.¹⁹ This article is drawn primarily from the Yahuda, Keynes, and Clark collections.

Newton's thought on the trinity can be arranged under five headings: 1. His rejection of the mixture of philosophical language and biblical revelation. 2. His denial of the textual grounds for the standard trinitarian argument and his interpretation of key texts. 3. His reading of the history of the period surrounding the Nicene Creed. 4. His view of the relationship

¹² Yahuda MS 20.

¹³ Babson MSS 436, 438 and 704 respectively.

¹⁴ For example, Newton begins with *Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Christi Incarnati, Christi Passio, Descendus, et Resurrectio, Christi Satisfactio and Redemptionare, Spiritus Sanctus Deus* and then moves into topics like *Angeli Mali et boni, Prae-destinatio, De Antchristo* etc.

¹⁵ Denis Petau, *Opus de Theologicis Dogmatibus*, ed. Ludovicus Guerin (8 vols.; Paris, 1864). Petau was a Jesuit and one of the leading Patristic scholars of the seventeenth century. Of the ten books planned for dogmatic theology, only five appeared: *De Deo, De Trinitate, De angelis, De mundi opificio* and *De Incarnatione*.

¹⁶ This is available in Brewster, *Memoirs*, II, 349-50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 342-46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, appendix 30.

¹⁹ Westfall dates this MS from the 80s; the library manuscript card catalog dates it in the 1690s.

of the Father and the Son. 5. His understanding of what the Church Fathers intended by their employment of the *ousia* word group.

I. Newton shared John Locke's rejection of innate ideas. We could only have true knowledge of what was present to our senses. "Substance," while it might exist, was epistemologically inaccessible, especially the substance of God. For Newton the Church proceeded best when it followed revelation and not philosophy as the sole source of its doctrine. In the "General Scholium" of the second edition of the *Principia* Newton wrote,

We have ideas of his [God's] attributes, but what the real substance of any thing is we know not. In bodies, we see only their figures and colours. We hear only the sounds. We touch only their outward surfaces. We smell only the smells, and taste the flavours; but their inward substances are not to be known either by our senses, or by any reflex act of our minds: much less, then, have we any idea of the substance of God.²⁰

This idea was reinforced in his analysis of the language the early bishops allowed in the theological debate regarding Paul of Samosata's introduction of the term ὁμοούσιος.

Had they interdicted the novel language of both parties, & only established the declared language in wch they received the faith from ye beginning & upon pain of excommunication commanded all men to acquiece in that language without farther disturbing the Churches about questions or opinions not proposed in the language of the scriptures they had quieted the Empire & the Church.²¹

In his *Quaries Regarding the Word* ὁμοούσιος, Newton asked "Whether Christ sent his apostles to preach metaphysics to the unlearned common people, and to their wives and children?"²² This distinction between religion and philosophy was the program outlined by Francis Bacon in his *Of the Advancement of Learning*.²³

²⁰ Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. tr. Andrew Motte (3 vols.; London, 1803), II, Bk. III, 312-13.

²¹ Yahuda MS. 15 fol. 190. Newton makes a similar point concerning the mixture of philosophical opinion and religion in his "seven points on religion" (Keynes MS. 6).

²² Newton, Keynes MS. 11 in Brewster, *Memoirs*, II, appendix XXX, 532.

²³ *New Organon and Of the Advancement of Learning*, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (London, 1905), 45-46.

II. Not only did Newton disagree with the traditional metaphysical foundation of the trinitarian doctrine, but he found that the biblical texts used to substantiate it were faulty. He shared his insights with his close friend John Locke:

Amongst Locke's friends were many Unitarians. Sir Isaac Newton, his junior by ten years, was an intimate friend. He sent Locke his critical discussions of the two Trinitarian proof-texts (1 John 7; and 1 Timothy iii. 16), a mark of extreme confidence in so cautious a person.²⁴

These insights were to be published anonymously by Locke's friend LeClerc, whom he had met in Holland, but at the last minute Newton withdrew them in a panic.²⁵ Referring first to the Johannine comma, Newton wrote,

Whereas all the Greek Manuscripts of the New Testament, and all the ancient versions, that have been made of it into any language whatever... are quite silent in regard to the testimony of the "three in Heaven"; and all the councils, fathers, commentators and other writers, at least of the first four centuries of the church...do plainly shew, that it stood in their books "it is the Spirit that beareth witness; because the Spirit is truth: For these are three that bear record, the Spirit the Water and the blood: and these three agree in One."²⁶

Moving to his second text, 1 Timothy 3:16 he continued,

What the Latins have done to the text of the first epistle of Saint John v.7. the Greeks have done to that of St. Paul's first epistle to Timothy iii 16. For by changing *ho* into *OC*, the abbreviation of *Theos*, they now read, "Great is the mystery of Godliness: *God* was manifested in the flesh." whereas all the churches for the first four or five hundred years; and the authors of all the ancient versions, Jerome, as well as the rest, read, "Great is the mystery of Godliness, which was manifested in the flesh."²⁷

²⁴ Herbert McClachlan, *The Religious Opinions of Milton, Locke and Newton* (Manchester, 1941), 101. Gjertsen has commented on the relationship of Locke and Newton, "Judging by Newton's surviving letters to Locke, the relationship between them was one of the freest and relaxed to be found in the whole correspondence" (p. 322).

²⁵ Manuel, *Religion*, 12, remarking that scientific controversy was tolerable for Newton, but religious controversy gave him deep anxiety.

²⁶ Isaac Newton, *Two Letters of Isaac Newton to Mr. LeClerc*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

We see then, that Newton wrote his *Two Notable Corruptions* on the texts of 1 Tim. 3:16 and the Johannine comma, 1 John 5:8. In that work Newton took the position that Erasmus's Greek text of 1516 was inaccurate, and as a result these two texts could not serve as pillars bearing the weight of the trinitarian argument.

Along the same line, Newton collected numerable texts that bore on the relationship of the persons of the trinity.²⁸ The first text listed by Newton under *Deus Pater* was 1 Cor. 8:6, which spoke of the one God and distinguished between the Father *of* whom are all things and the one Lord Jesus Christ *by* whom are all things. He quoted this text again in Article 12 of his manuscript entitled "On our Religion to God, to Christ, and the Church."²⁹ Likewise Newton's interpretation of John 10:30, "I and the Father are One," resisted the standard Athanasian formulation. In the second of two memoranda cited by More, Newton wrote,

Jesus therefore by calling himself the Son of God and saying I and the Father are one meant nothing more than that the Father had sanctified him and sent him into the world.³⁰

It is clear from this passage that Newton did not understand the text to mean that Jesus and the Father were ontologically one. Rather the implication was that the Father had set him aside (sanctified) for a purpose and that their unity was to be discovered in that purpose.

III. The third reason Newton struggled with the classical trinitarian formulation was his understanding of church history. He believed that the results of Nicaea were skewed by Athanasius, and that his interpretation of the creed represented an aberration of the true views of the early Fathers. In fact Newton believed that it was Athanasius who introduced the errors into the two texts already examined.³¹ Here Newton's preoccupation with prophecy influenced his reading of church history, so that the fourth century was seen as the time in which false teaching was introduced into the church. He believed that the central message of the book of Revelation

²⁸ Newton, in Keynes MS. 2, collected a multitude of texts under the headings of *Deus Pater, Deus Filius, Spiritus Sanctus Deus*. Newton was aware of a number of other textual corruptions (*Correspondence*, III, 129-42) and blamed many of these corruptions on the attempt of the church to alter any texts which could be used by the Arians to support their theology (138). Where the Arians, Macedonians, Nestorians, and Eutycheans had been accused of textual alterations in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, Newton found them innocent.

²⁹ Keynes MS. 9 in Brewster, *Memoirs*, 2, 350.

³⁰ More, 643.

³¹ Popkin, "Newton as a Bible Scholar," 110.

was that of the great apostasy in the fourth century when Athanasius and the Roman Church imposed a false doctrine of the trinity upon the Church.³² Concerning Newton's view of history William Whiston, his close friend and successor to the Lucasian chair, wrote,

Nay, I afterwards found that Sir Isaac was so hearty for the Baptists, as well as for the doctrines of Eusebius and Arius, that he sometimes suspected they were the two witnesses in the Revelation.³³

Newton's antipathy toward Athanasius is well documented. In "Paradoxical questions" (MS. 10, Keynes collection) Newton accused Athanasius of lying, murder, adultery, and seizing the See of Alexandria "by sedition and violence against the canons of that church."³⁴ In Newton's mind, moreover, Athanasius's being deprived of his See at the Council of Tyre had to do not with the controversy over doctrine but with his outrageous tactics as Bishop.³⁵ Based upon new manuscript evidence, contemporary scholarship has come to a similar conclusion.³⁶ Beyond this Newton maintained that Athanasius had labored to prove that Arius had died outside of the fellowship of the church by concocting the story that he died "in a bog-house" just before being received back into communion, and that this ignominious death represented God's judgment against his cause.³⁷ Newton cited the early historians Socrates, Sozomen, and Rufinus to show that in fact Arius had traveled from Constantinople to Tyre and Jerusalem then to Alexandria "before he died & was one of those whome the Council of Jerusalem received into its communion."³⁸

What is more important, we discover in this same manuscript clues to Newton's understanding of the history of the church directly following Nicaea. In the Keynes "Paradoxical Questions" he asked "Whether the Council of Tyre & Jerusalem was not an Orthodox authentick Council

³² Westfall, "Isaac Newton's *Theologiae Gentilis Origines Philosophicae*," in *The Secular Mind: Transformations of Faith in Modern Europe*, ed. W. Wagar (New York, 1982), 17.

³³ McClachlan, 129, quoting Whiston, *Authentic Records*, Pt. II, 1075. Also Whiston's *Memoirs* (first edition), 206.

³⁴ In Brewster, *Memoirs*, II, 342f. There is another MS in UCLA's Clark Library titled "Paradoxical questions concerning Athanasius," which runs upward of 100 folio pages.

³⁵ Newton, Keynes MS. 10, Questions I, XI, XIII, see also the MS. in the Clark Library by the same title, which expands upon the charges *et passim*.

³⁶ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh, 1988), 254-55.

³⁷ Newton, Keynes MS. 10, Question I.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Newton cites: Socr. l.1 c. 26, 27, 33, 37, 38; Sozom. l.2, c. 27, 28, 29; Rufin. l.1. c. 11.

bigger than that of Nice.”³⁹ Newton asserted that this Council was every bit as significant, and more so, than Nicaea for determining the mind of the Church regarding the trinity. He defended it at length:

This council has been reputed Arian & on that account of no authority, but the accusation was never proved & an accusation without proof is of no credit... Now all the evidence that this Council was Arian is only this, that they received Arius into communion & banished Athanasius... For they did not receive Arius without his disowning those things for wch [sic] he had been condemned at Nice, nor condemned Athanasius for his owning the Nicene decrees: & 'tis not ye receiving or condemning men but ye receiving or condemning opinions that can make any Council heretical. So far was this Council from being Arian that the Bishops thereof in almost all their following Councils declared against Arianism & anathematized the opinions for wch [sic] Arius had been condemned... we have no other means of knowing men's faith but by their profession & outward communion & way of worship, & by all these characters the Fathers of the Council were Orthodox. They constantly professed against Arianism & were in communion with the churches of all the World & worshipt as other churches of that age did.⁴⁰

At stake for Newton was his conviction that the Nicene formulation was in fact *not* understood by the majority of bishops in the way in which Athanasius, and subsequent generations, interpreted it.

That the church in ye times next after Constantius were so far from making one singular substance that they decryed it for heresy and Sabellianism notwithstanding any distinction of persons what ever. See ye creed of Lisenius⁴¹ sent to Athanasius and [the] Council of Alexandria's epistle to ye Antiochians.⁴²

Perhaps even more telling of Newton's perception of the trinitarian doctrine in the early church was his extensive use of the Patristic scholar Petavius. F.X. Murphy writes that it was Petavius who first called the attention of theologians to the “hesitations, misconceptions, and inexactitudes of many of the early Fathers with regard to the theology of the

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Question III.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Question III.

⁴¹ Spelling is unclear in the MS. due to Newton's handwriting.

⁴² Newton, Keynes MS. 2.

Trinity in the early church.”⁴³ As a result he was accused by the Jansenists and by Bishop Bull, in his *Defensio fidei Nicaenae*, of making the majority of the Fathers of the first three centuries deny the divinity of the Son. Actually, Petavius’s work was of “crucial significance” in the history of doctrine.⁴⁴ The work of contemporary scholars such as Hanson,⁴⁵ Kelly,⁴⁶ and Prestige⁴⁷ have confirmed Petavius’s understanding of the Patristic material. For example, Kelly has argued that although later theologians concluded that the Fathers at Nicaea understood ὁμοούσιος to mean three persons in one identical substance, as far as the Fathers themselves were concerned,

there are the strongest possible reasons for doubting this. The chief of these is the history of the term ὁμοούσιος itself, for in both its secular and theological use prior to Nicaea it always conveyed, primarily at any rate, the “generic” sense.⁴⁸

Newton’s papers contain extensive notes taken from Petavius’s *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*. Petavius was perceived as an enemy of orthodoxy by Bull and Waterland because he called into question their view of a monolithic adherence by the Ante-Nicene Fathers to what became the Nicene formula. Petavius recognized and discussed under the heading of the third chapter of *De Trinitate* certain disagreements among the Fathers,⁴⁹ and Newton drew his notes in Latin most heavily from this third chapter.⁵⁰

IV. Newton’s trinitarian position is further clarified by examining his understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. To date, the assumption among scholars seems to be that Newton’s earliest convictions, as represented in his notebook from the seventies, held fast throughout his life. “The convictions that solidified as he collected the notes,”

⁴³ Francis X. Murphy, “Petavius” in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 16 Vols. Edited by the editorial staff at the Catholic University of America (New York, 1967), XI, 199-200.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁵ Hanson, *The Search*, 162.

⁴⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, 1978), 234-35.

⁴⁷ George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London, 1952), ch. 10.

⁴⁸ Kelly, 234-35.

⁴⁹ “Exponuntur veterum quorundam, qui ante Ariana tempora in Christiana professione floruerunt, de Trinitate sententiae ab catholica regula, saltem loquendi usu, discrepantes; ut Justini Martyris, Athenagorae, Tatiani, Theophilli, Irenai, Clementis Romani” (*Theologica Dogmata*, II, 353).

⁵⁰ Newton, Keynes, MS. 4, et passim. Newton also cited Petavius in Keynes MS. 2.

Westfall writes, “remained unaltered until his death.”⁵¹ An exception to this was Dr. Johnson’s comment, a century after Newton, that “Sir Isaac Newton set out an infidel, and came to be a very firm believer.”⁵² While Johnson overstated the case, he points us in the most profitable direction for evaluating the mixed evidence on Newton’s beliefs, which is that Newton’s thought on the trinity underwent development through the years.

As we have seen, the majority of scholars have classified Newton as an Arian. This position was expressed most fully by More. He based his conclusion on two previously unpublished MSS, and two short memoranda. In the first of these unpublished manuscripts Newton laid down fourteen *Argumenta* in Latin, which, More argued, demonstrated that for Newton, the Son was neither coeternal with, nor equal to, the Father. More listed Newton’s salient points as follows: (2) Because the Son is called the Word: John 1.1.; (4) Because God begot the Son at some time, he had not existence from eternity. Prov. viii. 23, 25; (5) Because the Father is greater than the Son. John XIV, 28; (6). Because the Son did not know his last hour. Mark XIII, 32- Matt. XXIV, 36- Rev. 1.1 and V.3.; and (7) Because the Son received all things from the Father; and (9). Because the Son could be incarnated.⁵³ In the second manuscript Newton offered seven *Rationes* against the traditional formulation, including: (1) *Homoousian* is unintelligible. ’Twas not understood in the Council of Nice (Euseb. apud Soc....) nor ever since. What cannot be understood is no object of belief; (6) The Father is God, creating and a person; the Son is God, created and a person; and the Holy Ghost is God, proceeding and a person; *et tamen non est nisi unus Deus*; and (7) The Person is intellectual substance [*substantia intellectualis*], therefore the three Persons are three substances.⁵⁴

Besides these two unpublished manuscripts, More cites two memoranda which, he says, “can mean only that he [Newton] did not believe in the divinity of Jesus.”⁵⁵ The first states that God had the prophecy [of the Book of Revelation] originally in his own breast and that Christ received it from God and delivered it to John, who gave it to the churches in a continual subordination. “And to deny this subordination would be to deny Jesus Christ as he is a Prophet.” The second states that Newton understood Jesus saying “I and the Father are one” to mean nothing more than that “the Father had sanctified him and sent him into the world” and that when he called himself the Son of God or God, that this was simply in the Old

⁵¹ Westfall, *Never at Rest*, 312.

⁵² James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.* (New York, n.d.), 274.

⁵³ More, 642.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 642-43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 643.

Testament sense by which he defended his statement. More takes this to be evidence of Unitarianism.⁵⁶

By definition, the two terms of Arianism are: 1) That the Son was a creature, something made (κτίσμα) out of nothing (ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων) and therefore like the rest of creation. 2) That there was a time when the Son did not exist (ὅτι ἦν πότε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν).⁵⁷ Arius stated these views in a letter to his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia,

And before he was begotten or created or defined or established, he was not. For he was not unbegotten. But we are persecuted because we say, “The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning.” ... We are persecuted because we say “He is from nothing.” But we speak thus inasmuch as he is neither part of God nor from any substratum. On account of this we are persecuted.⁵⁸

There seems to be evidence of both these Arian propositions in Newton’s thought in the passages quoted by More. In the fourth of the fourteen *Argumenta* above, Newton claimed that since the Son was begotten at some time, he had not existed from eternity. Likewise in number six of the seven *Rationes* Newton writes that the “Son is God *created* and a person.” This evidence alone might well lead us to More’s conclusion that Newton was an Arian.⁵⁹ In addition, Westfall cites MS. 14 from the Yahuda collection as evidence of Newton’s Arianism.

Now the term λόγος before St. John wrote, was generally used in ye sense of the Platonists, when applied to an intelligent being, & ye Arrians understood it in ye same sence [sic], & therefore theirs is the true sense of St. John.⁶⁰

Westfall gives the date of Yahuda 14 as sometime between 1672 and 1675.⁶¹ Taken together, this evidence points toward Newton’s Arian convictions in the early period of his reflection.

Manuel quotes one of Newton’s Mint papers in which he chastized Athenagoras for calling Christ the “Idea” of all things, taking him for the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, in *Sources of Early Christian Thought Series* (Philadelphia, 1980), 17.

⁵⁸ Arius, *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* trans. by Rusch, 30.

⁵⁹ Unfortunately More does not tell us where he found these manuscripts. It would be helpful to review the contexts of Newton’s comments for further elucidation of his meaning.

⁶⁰ Yahuda, 14, fol. 25, cited by Westfall, *Never at Rest*, 316.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

Logos of the Platonists. For Newton this made Christ the λόγος ἐνδιάθετος of the Father, making him “generated not from all eternity but in the beginning of the creation, the eternal Logos being then emitted or projected outwardly like the Aeons of the Gnosticks and Logos of the Cataphrygians and Platonists.”⁶² Newton went on to condemn Athenagoras for making the Holy Ghost “an emanation of the Father, not a necessary and eternal emanation but a voluntary and temporary one.”⁶³ How can we explain the apparent shift in Newton’s thought from saying that the Arians had rightly understood John through the Platonic meaning of the logos, and his rejection of Athenagoras for adopting the same interpretation? Moreover, he quite clearly rejects one of the fundamental tenets of Arianism here, i.e., “that there was a time when he was not,” by holding for a “necessary and eternal generation.”

The most logical explanation seems to be that, during the twenty-one years or more⁶⁴ which separated these two statements, Newton’s thought on the trinity had matured. This idea is supported by the intensive study of the early history of the church, and particularly the patristic Fathers, which Newton undertook in the late seventies and eighties. At least thirteen of the Yahuda manuscripts on the Fathers and early church history come from this period.⁶⁵ Thus, while the manuscript evidence More and Westfall have selected indicates that Newton denied the eternal generation of the Son, in fact Newton later explicitly condemned Athenagoras for allegedly holding just such a position. Therefore, to say that Newton held the Arian tenet that “there was a time when he was not” can only be said to be true in his early writing. As for Newton’s statement about the Son being “God created,” this need not be interpreted strictly but may be understood simply as a linguistic contrast to the uncreatedness of the Father. Newton might just as well have said “begotten,” except that he would have destroyed the literary parallelism. We must remember, after all, that he says the Son is *God* created, and Newton was clearly a sophisticated enough theologian to know that God was not a created being.

How then did Newton understand the relationship between the Father and the Son? Here there is a link between Newton’s natural philosophy and

⁶² Manuel, *Religion*, 71-72.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 72. Mint Papers, V. fol. 37r. Here Manuel rightly warns us against an all too “facile identification of Newton with the philosophical doctrines of the Cambridge Platonists.” One of the primary differences between the Platonists and the Newton was over the latter’s rejection of the epistemology of Platonic Idealism.

⁶⁴ Newton began his work at the mint in 1696, and so the paper cited by Manuel cannot be any older than this.

⁶⁵ Yahuda, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 5.2, 5.3, 11, 12, 13.1, 14, 15, 18, 19, and 29.

his trinitarian conception. The link is in the term “dominion.” In the “General Scholium” of his *Principia* Newton envisioned God’s relationship to creation in terms of dominion.⁶⁶ This is the same relationship he projected upon the relationship between the Father and Son. They could be co-equal only in the sense that the Son derived his authority from the Father. Otherwise the ultimate authority and unity of the Father as the *principium* of the universe would be jeopardized. Newton saw the Father as giving his power, dominion, and authority to the Son and this alone was what qualified the Son for worship.

The heathens and Gnosticks supposed not only their Gods but even the souls of men and the stars to be of one substance with the supreme God and yet were Idolators for worshipping them. And he that is of this opinion may believe Christ to be of one substance with the Father without making him more than a mere man. Tis not consubstantiality but power and dominion which gives a right to be worshipped.⁶⁷

Newton balanced his subordinationism by speaking of a monarchial unity.

And therefore as a father and his son cannot be called one King upon account of their being consubstantial but may be called one King by unity of dominion if the Son be Viceroy under the father: so God and his son cannot be called one God upon account of their being consubstantial.⁶⁸

In his reading of the history of doctrine Newton concluded that both Arius and the Homoousians had been guilty of introducing “metaphysical opinions” into the church’s teaching. The former had been dispelled by anathematization, and the latter by the repeal of the homoousian language of Nicaea by several subsequent councils. For him the truly biblical alternative, that of a subordinationism in monarchial unity, was taught by the Eastern churches.

The Homousians made the father and son one God by a metaphysical unity, the unity of substance: the Greek Churches rejected all metaphysical divinity as well that of Arius as that of the Homousians and

⁶⁶ Isaac Newton, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. tr. Andrew Motte (3 vols.; London, 1803), 544. See Edward Davis, “Newton’s Rejection of the ‘Newtonian World View’: The Role of Divine Will in Newton’s Natural Philosophy,” *Fides et Historia*, XXII, 2 (1990), et passim.

⁶⁷ Newton, Yahuda MS 15.7, fol. 154r in Manuel, *Religion*, 60.

⁶⁸ Newton, Yahuda MS 15.7, fol. 154r, in Manuel, *The Religion*, 58.

made the father and son one God by a Monarchical unity, an unity of Dominion, the Son receiving all things from the father, being subject to him, executing his will, sitting in his throne and calling him his God, and so is but one God with the Father as a king and his viceroy are but one king.⁶⁹

This approach was also borne out in Newton's exegesis. In commenting on the famous passage in Philippians 2 regarding the Son's not grasping for equality with God, Newton commented,

Rapine must here be applied to something wch it is capable of rapine that is not to ye substance or essence of a [c]aptor, but to something that is acquirable by him. For the substance essence or internal nature of a man is without ye limits of what he may commit rapine in. As its [sic] improper to call any thing as stone blind wch is incapable of seeing so its improper to say any thing is not acquired by rapine wch is not acquirable by rapine. And therefore ye Το ἔλναι ἱσα θεῶ' is to be understood not of ye [here the word "essential" is scratched out] congenit or natural divinity of [our] saviour but his glory and exaltation [and] dominion which he acquired by his death that wch St. Paul expresses in ye next words.⁷⁰

Thus for Isaac Newton the trinity was valid, but only if it is conceived with a monarchian idea of dominion as the key to understanding the union of the Father and the Son.

Newton applied this Monarchianism consistently in his view of right worship. Several articles from his "On our Religion to God, to Christ, and the Church"⁷¹ illustrate the point: Art. 1. There is one God the Father, ever living, omnipresent, omniscient, almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. Art. 6. All the worship (whether of prayer, praise, or thanksgiving) which was due to the Father before the coming of Christ, is still due to him. Christ came not to diminish the worship of his Father. Art. 7. Prayers are most prevalent when directed to the Father in the name of the Son. Art. 8. We are to return thanks to the Father alone for creating us, and giving us food and raiment and other blessings of this life, and whatsoever we are to thank him for, and desire that he would do for us, we ask of him immediately in the name

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58; cf., Yahuda MS. 15 fol. 47, where Newton writes, "For the people of the Church Catholick were zealous for a monarchial unity against a metaphysical one during the first two centuries"; and cf., Yahuda 15 fol. 154.

⁷⁰ Newton, Keynes MS. 2.

⁷¹ Newton, Keynes MS. 9. In Brewster, *Memoirs*, II, appendix No. XXX.

of Christ. Art. 9. We need not pray to Christ to intercede for us. If we pray the Father aright he will intercede. Art. 10. It is not necessary to salvation to direct our prayers to any other than the Father in the name of the Son. Art. 11. To give the name of God to angels or kings, is not against the First Commandment. To give the worship of the God of the Jews to angels or kings, is against it. The meaning of the commandment is, Thou shalt worship no other God but me. Art. 12. To us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.—That is, we are to worship the Father alone as God Almighty, and Jesus alone as the Lord, the Messiah, the Great King, the Lamb of God who was slain, and hath redeemed us with his blood, and made us kings and priests.

Here we see reflected Newton's concern for the proper ordering of trinitarian worship according to his monarchial scheme in which the Son serves as intermediary. Ultimately it is the Father, and the Father alone, in whom all worship terminates. Even the traditional understanding of the intermediary role of the Son is somewhat diminished in Newton's scheme, especially in articles nine and ten. There we find that while we may call Jesus "God" without transgressing the first commandment, he is not to be worshiped as "God Almighty," but only in relationship to his office as Monarch, as "Lord, the Messiah, the Great King, and the Lamb of God." Christ is not worshiped on the basis of his ontology according to Newton's theology but on the basis of his christological office.

The worship wch we are directed in scripture to give to Jesus Christ respects his death & exaltation to the right hand of God & is given to him as our Lord & King & tends to the glory of God the father. Should we give the Father that worship wch is due to the Son we should be Patripassians & should we give the Son all that worship wch is due to the father we should make two creators and be all guilty of polytheism & in both cases we should practically deny the father & the Son. We may give blessing & honour & glory & power to God & the Lamb together but it must be in different respects, to God as he is God the father Almighty who created the heaven & earth & to the Lamb as he is the Lord who was slain for us & washed away our sins in his own blood & is exalted to the right hand of God the father. In worshipping them we must keep to the characters given them in the primitive creed then we are safe.⁷²

Newton could not abide worship grounded in the traditional understanding

⁷² Yahuda MS. 15, fol. 46, cf., fol. 68.

of consubstantiality, and referred to it as “this strange religion of ye west,” and “the cult of three equal Gods.”⁷³

V. The final point in determining Newton’s understanding of the trinity is his understanding of the *ousia* word group. More has written,

His purpose was not to do away entirely with the interpretation of the Athanasian doctrine of one substance, but to show that the argument over *homoousios* was not an important, or rather not a fundamental doctrine. He would have us believe that the church was all the while Arian.⁷⁴

While, as we have seen, we may have cause to doubt the last clause of this statement, the first part appears to be true. In his “Observations on Athanasius’ Works” Newton held that the linguistic distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* was relatively late, and that at the time the Nicene Creed was formulated the terms were virtually interchangeable.⁷⁵ On one of the pages of Keynes MS.2, under the heading *De Homoousia, usia, hypostasi, substantia et personis*, Newton noted that the term ὁμοούσιος was “condemned by ye Council of Antioch against Paul of Samosata.”⁷⁶ Under the same heading he noted that

Jerom [sic] in his Epistle to Damascus (Epist. 57) scrupling at ye use of thre [sic] *hypostases* as Arian, does notwithstanding expound substance of ye [illeg.] & makes thre [sic] hypostases to signify three kinds of substances or *usias*. Epiphanius *hares.* 69 & 70 making out one *hypostasis* in ye Deity, at ye same time expounds it of generical unity. So Athanasius with also ye Councils of Alexandria allowing ye language of *hypostasis* makes a general union and similitude of substance as you may see in his *Epistle to ye Antiochians* (p. 577) & that to ye Africans.⁷⁷

In this unpublished passage we are able to begin to discern the contours Newton’s interpretation of ὁμοούσιος. The term “generical unity” is the key. Newton says that early on ὑπόστασις and οὐσία were used

⁷³ Newton, Yahuda MS 1.4 fol.50 and 11, fol.7. in Westfall “The Rise of Science,” 231-32, n. 45.

⁷⁴ More, 643.

⁷⁵ Newton, Keynes MS. 2, “Distinctio inter ousian and hypostasin non coepit ante tempora Julian (*vide Orat. 5 contra Arianos*).”

⁷⁶ Newton, Keynes MS. 2. Newton constantly mentions this condemnation of the term throughout Yahuda 15, e. g., fol. 26.

⁷⁷ Newton, Keynes MS. 2.

interchangeably and that they referred not to a numerical identity of substance but to a generic unity; a oneness in kind. This is reinforced by Newton's interpretation of Athanasius's two epistles, where the term ὑπόστασις (which is equivalent to οὐσία) is said to make a "general union and similitude of substance."⁷⁸ Thus the substances are identical in kind, but not in number.

The homousians taught also that the Son was not μονοουσιος or ταυτουσιος to the father but ομοουσιος, & that to make them μονοουσιολοι or ταυτουσιολοι or, to take the three persons for any thing else then personal substances tended to Sabellianism.⁷⁹

This, of course, was the position which was held by the party at Nicaea led by Eusebius of Caesarea, whose theology, following the Second Sirmium Council of 357, was termed "homoiousion."⁸⁰ It is likely that this was the position held by the majority of bishops at the council; and although they acceded to the use of the term "homoousios" as a bulwark against the Arians, they interpreted it in a *homoiousion* way.⁸¹

This interpretation is best seen in Eusebius himself, who wrote explaining the proceedings,

When they had set this formulary, [the Nicene Creed] we did not leave without examination that passage in which it is said that the Son is of the substance of the Father, and consubstantial with the Father. Questions and arguments thence arose, and the meaning of the terms was exactly tested. Accordingly they were led to confess that the word consubstantial [ομοουσιος] signifies that the Son is of the Father, but not as being a part of the Father. We deemed it right to receive this opinion; for that is sound doctrine which teaches that the Son is of the Father, but not part of His substance. From the love of peace, and lest we should fall from the true belief, we also accept this view, neither do we reject the term "consubstantial." For the same reason we admitted the expression, "begotten, but not made;" for they alleged that the word "made" applies generally to all things which are created by the Son, to which the Son is in no respect similar; and that consequently He is not

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Yahuda MS. 15 fol. 182.

⁸⁰ Hanson, *The Search*, 346-47.

⁸¹ See Hanson, *The Search*, 162, 169-70; Charles A. Briggs, *Theological Symbolics* (New York, 1914), 91-92; R. S. Franks, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1953), 28, 106. See also Athanasius, *De Decretis*, Chapter 5, sect. 20, *NPNF*, second series, IV, 163-64.

a created thing, like the things made by Him, but is of a substance superior to all created objects. The Holy Scriptures teach Him to be begotten of the Father, by a mode of generation which is incomprehensible and inexplicable to all created beings. So also the term “of one substance with the Father,” [ΕΚ ΤΗΣ ΟΥΣΙΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΤΡΟΥ] when investigated, was accepted not in accordance with bodily relations or similarity to mortal division of substance, nor abscission, nor any modification or change or diminution in the power of the Father, all of which are alien from the nature of the unbegotten Father. It was concluded that the expression “being of one substance with the Father,” implies that the Son of God does not resemble, in any one respect, the creatures which He has made; but that to the Father alone, who begat Him, He is in all points perfectly like: for He is of the essence and of the substance of none save of the Father. This interpretation having been given of the doctrine, it appeared right to us to assent to it...⁸²

We are suggesting, then, that rather than being an Arian, Newton resembled more closely the fourth century position of Eusebius and the Homoiousians who followed him.

This suggestion is supported by Newton’s “Queries Regarding the Word ὁμοούσιος.”⁸³ The pertinent ones include: Quaere 2. Whether the word ὁμοούσιος ever was in any creed before the Nicene; or any creed was produced by any one bishop at the Council of Nice for authorizing the use of that word? Quaere 3. Whether the introducing the use of that word is not contrary to the Apostles’ rule of holding fast the form of sound words? Quaere 4. Whether the use of that word was not pressed upon the Council of Nice against the inclination of the major part of the Council? Quaere 6. Whether it was not agreed by the Council that the word should, when applied to the Word of God, signify nothing more than that Christ was the express image of the Father? and whether many of the bishops, in pursuance of that interpretation of the word allowed by the Council, did not, in their subscriptions, by way of caution, add ΤΟΥΤ ἔστιν ὁμοιούσιος. Quaere 7. Whether Hosius (or whoever translated that Creed into Latin) did not impose upon the Western Churches by translating ὁμοούσιος by the words *unius substantiae*, instead of *consubstantialis*? and whether by that translation the Latin Churches were not drawn into an opinion that the Father and Son had one common substance, called by the Greeks *Hypostasis*, and whether they did not thereby give occasion to the Eastern

⁸² Eusebius’s formulary in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*. Book I, Chap. XI. *NPNF*, III, 50.

⁸³ Newton, Keynes, MS. 11. See Brewster, *Memoirs*, II, Appendix XXX, 532-34.

Churches to cry out, presently after the Council of Sardica, that the Western Churches were become Sabellian? Quaere 8. Whether the Greeks, in opposition to this notion and language, did not use the language of three *Hypostases*, and whether in those days the word *Hypostasis* did not signify a substance? Quaere 9. Whether the Latins did not at that time accuse all those of Arianism who used the language of three *Hypostases*, and thereby charge Arianism upon the Council of Nice, without knowing the true meaning of the Nicene Creed. Quaere 10. Whether the Latins were not convinced, in the Council of Ariminum, that the Council of Nice, by the word ὁμοούσιος, understood nothing more than that the Son was the express image of the Father?—the acts of the Council of Nice were not produced for convincing them. And whether, upon producing the acts of that Council for proving this, the Macedonians, and some others, did not accuse the bishops of hypocrisy, who, in subscribing these acts, had interpreted them by the word ὁμοιούσιος in their subscriptions? Quaere 11. Whether Athanasius, Hilary, and in general the Greeks and Latins, did not, from the time of the reign of Julian the Apostate, acknowledge the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be three substances, and continue to do so till the schoolmen changed the signification of the word *hypostasis*, and brought in the notion of three persons in one single substance? Quaere 12. Whether the opinion of the equality of the three substances was not first set on foot in the reign of Julian the Apostate, by Athanasius, Hilary, &c.?

Newton attributed the “orthodox” formula of “three persons in one substance” to confusion on two levels in the early history of the Church. On the first level was the confusion over the interpretation of the term ὁμοούσιος which, he argued, was understood by the Nicene Bishops in the sense of ὁμοιούσιος. Discussing the meaning of ὁμοούσιος at Nicaea, Newton wrote in the 90s:

For the word signifies either that a thing is of the same substance with another or that it is of a like substance. For ὁμος sometimes signifies *like* & that in composition as well as alone, as in the words ὁμοπαθῆς, *obnoxious to like passions* ὁμόνεκρος *like a dead body as to corruption*, ὁμόφλοιος *having a like bark*, & in this sense ὁμοούσιος signifies nothing more than ὁμοιούσιος *of like substance*.⁸⁴

Newton cites with approval from Hilary’s *de Synodis* on this point:

For if we preach one substance according to ye property & similitude of nature, so that the similitude may not define the species, that is limit

⁸⁴ Clark MS. “Paradoxical Questions...,” fol. 48, Newton’s emphasis.

it to a singularity, but signify the genus, we preach it religiously provided that by one substance we understand the similitude of property so that their being one do not signify a singular substance but two equals.⁸⁵

The fact that this was the meaning intended by the Council is certified by Eusebius of Caesarea's letter, with which Newton was familiar.⁸⁶ In order to guarantee this interpretation, certain of the Fathers had subscribed the creed with a specific mention that by ὁμοούσιος they meant ὁμοιόυσιος.

So then ye Nicene Fathers first in their debates agreed that ὁμοούσιος signified nothing more then that ye Son was of like substance with ye father, that is, that he was ὁμοιόυσιος to him, & then by way of caution exprest this interpretation in their subscriptions.⁸⁷

Newton cited Epiphanius to the effect that the term ταυτούσιον was not used, which would indicate the same numerical substance and would be Sabellianism.⁸⁸ For Newton, this interpretation of the word ὁμοούσιος had been proven beyond doubt.

The Council of Nice in decreeing ye Son homoousios to ye father understood that he & ye father were two substances of one nature or essence as Curcellaeus & Cudworth have proved beyond all cavil.⁸⁹

The natural rise of the *homoiousian* party in the East was, for Newton, simply the logical outgrowth of the orthodox convictions of the Nicene Fathers.

All this plainly respects ye Council of Nice: for that was ye great & orthodox synod, the only synod wherein ye homoousios was subscribed & ye synod wherein it was interpreted of similitude in that ye Son was not like the creatures made by him but like the father only, as you may see in ye above mentioned letter of Eusebius [of Caesarea]. Whence it is plain not only that the Nicene fathers subscribed after this manner but

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 45-46, see Hilary, *de Synodis*, XXVII, 67.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 51.

⁸⁸ Newton, Keynes MS. 2, citing Epiphanius, *Hares.* 76, n.7, cf., Yahuda 15 fol. 102 and fol. 8.

⁸⁹ Newton, Clark MS. "Paradoxical Questions," fol. 44.

also that the Greek Churches during the reigns of Constantius & Valens did own this Council & by vertue [sic] of these subscriptions plead it on their side & that it was from thence that ye language of ὁμοιούσιος had its rise & was spread so easily over all the east.⁹⁰

On the second level was the problem of the translation of terms from Greek into Latin, which created in the Western church the idea that the Father and Son shared the same numerical substance, an idea rejected by the Greeks. Writing after 1710, Newton gives a learned summation of the events surrounding Nicaea.

The word ὁμοούσιος wch was used by the Nicene Council in this Creed & wch is here translated *consubstantial*, was by the Latins improperly translated *unius substantiae*. For *unius substantiae* may signify two things of one & the same common substance: but the words ὁμοούσιος & consubstantial were always taken by the ancient Greeks & Latins for two substances of one & the same essence nature or species. For Eusebius of Caesarea writing to his Church in the time of this Council & giving them an account of what passed in it concerning the faith, told them that it was agreed by the Council that the son's being consubstantial to the father signified nothing more then [sic] that the Son of God had no similitude wth the creatures wch were made by him, but was in all respects like ye father & from no other substance then the father's. And the Nicene fathers a considerable number of them in subscribing the decrees of the Council by way of explanation that the son was ὁμοιούσιος to the father.⁹¹

It is clear that Newton, at least by the 1690s, was familiar with the nuances of terms employed by the early Church. The fact that he maintained that the Nicene Fathers held to a *homoiousian* interpretation of the formula, which meant that the Son was an “express image” of the Father (Quaeries 6 and 10), indicates that he was deeply familiar with the debates. He blamed the undermining of this position on Athanasius.

And lastly though this Council [Nicene] allowed the interpretation of homoousios by similitude & the fathers by way of caution exprest this interpretation in their subscriptions yet, by the clamours of Athanasius & his party it is since grown ye semiarrian [sic] heresy for any man to

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 50.

⁹¹ Yahuda MS. 15 fol. 49.

make this interpretation. Whether Athanasius therefore & his friends have not done violence to this Council I leave to be considered.⁹²

The “Quaeries on the word ὁμοούσιος,” coupled with the evidence from Keynes MS. 2, Yahuda MS. 15 and especially the Clark MS on the “Paradoxical Questions,” support the theory that Newton himself, at least by the 1690s, held a *homoiousian* position regarding his interpretation of the Nicene Creed.

It is quite possible that those who have come to the conclusion that Newton was either “orthodox” (Biot, Brewster) or an Arian (More and contemporary scholars) are simply interpreting his position in light of an inadequate framework of options. More illustrates this kind of framework:

The anti-Trinitarians can be classed under three main divisions: the Arians who denied that the Son was coeternal with the father, though he was begot before time began and by him the Father created all things...the Socinians who believe that he did not exist before his appearance on earth, but that he was an object of prayer; the Humanitarians, or Unitarians, who believe him to be a man, and not an object of prayer.⁹³

It may be that in the early 1670s Newton himself wrote out of a similar framework and saw the Arian position as the most consistent. It seems clear, however, that by the 1690s (or if Westfall’s dating of the Clark MS is right, by the 1680s) his trinitarian study was sufficiently nuanced so as to have adopted the *homoiousian* position over and against both Athanasianism and Arianism.

Rather than squeezing Newton into the standard seventeenth century schools of thought on the trinity, I am suggesting that the key to his thought is found in the broader categories of the fourth century upon which he had developed an expertise, specifically among those, like Eusebius, who held the *homoiousian* interpretation of the Nicene Creed, with which Newton was now obviously quite familiar and sympathetic. If the Newton historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have found it “a blot on his record”⁹⁴ that Newton was unwilling to join Whiston’s attempt to restore “primitive Christianity” or to defend him when he was ousted from Cambridge, perhaps it was, after all, not due to Newton’s being “all too human”⁹⁵ but because he believed Whiston, as an avowed Arian, had

⁹² Newton, Clark MS., “Paradoxical Questions,” fol. 90.

⁹³ More, 630, n.41.

⁹⁴ Keynes, “Newton the Man,” 31.

⁹⁵ Manuel, *Religion*, 62-63.

pushed his subordinationism too far.⁹⁶ Newton was neither “orthodox” (according to the Athanasian creed) nor an Arian. He believed that both of these groups had wandered into metaphysical speculation. He was convinced that his position was the truly biblical one, in which the Son was affirmed to be the express image of the Father, and that this position was best represented by those Bishops at Nicaea who held the Son to be of the same kind of substance as the Father but not numerically the same. Newton may still be considered heterodox, but in light of the evidence of his theological development he may no longer be considered an Arian, that is to say, a heretic.

Arcadia, Calif.

⁹⁶ It is worth noting that while Newton broke with Whiston, he maintained his close friendship with Dr. Samuel Clarke, who was accused of Arianism after the publication of his *Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* in 1712, and who maintained that his position was not Arian but rather in keeping with scripture and tradition. For the relationship between Clarke and Newton see Thomas C. Pfizenmaier, “*The Trinitarian Theology of Dr. Samuel Clarke: Context, Sources and Controversy*” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 152-86.