

# Isaac Newton and Socinianism

## Associations with a Greater Heresy

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We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him (1 Cor. 8:4-6).

### **Newton and Socinianism**

Isaac Newton was not a Socinian. That is to say, he was not a communicant member of the Polish Brethren, nor did he hold to a Socinian Christology. Furthermore, Newton never expressly acknowledged any debt to Socinianism — recognized as a heresy more dangerous than Arianism — and his only explicit reference to this movement is negative. Nevertheless, Newton was not only open to Socinian ideas, but appropriated them. Moreover, Newton's use of Socinianism may have extended to a range of his endeavors. In this article, I demonstrate that there are Socinian parallels in Newton's theology, historiography, textual criticism, biblical hermeneutics and even his natural philosophy. In conclusion, I argue that an appreciation of Newton's engagement with Socinianism is crucial to making sense of a number of his pursuits — including his intentions for the General Scholium to the *Principia*, one of the classic texts of the Scientific Revolution.

### **Defining Socinianism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries**

Emerging in the 1560s from Erasmian, Anabaptist and Evangelical Rationalist roots, the Polish Brethren were a product of the Radical Reformation.<sup>1</sup> In 1580 the Siense theologian Fausto Sozzini aligned himself with the Brethren, bringing intellectual cohesion to the movement of which he became eponymous.

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<sup>1</sup>On the Socinians and the Radical Reformation, see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation (RR)*, Kirksville, 1992.

Their anti-Trinitarianism, mortalism and believers' baptism, along with their anti-creedalism, rejection of mystery in religion and belief in the separation of church and state, branded the Socinians as heretics. For this reason, after almost a century of uneasy toleration, they were expelled from Poland in 1660. This led to the development of a Socinian diaspora in the low countries, from where their publications filtered into England. Socinianism was a book religion both in its biblicism and erudition, as well as its steady output of Latin theological texts. Socinian works were anathematized by the orthodox, but proved popular in radical circles. While the lower clergy could not afford these volumes, they remained in constant demand in seventeenth-century England.<sup>2</sup>

The term "Socinian" came to mean many things in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and untangling these meanings is difficult. Moreover, the term was often used simply as an epithet for heresy, much like "Arian" or "atheist." Furthermore, the terms Arian and Socinian were frequently used interchangeably and Socinian Christology (which held that Christ was literally Son of God miraculously conceived by the virgin Mary) was constantly conflated with humanitarianism (that Christ was a *mere* man born of human mother *and* father). This conflation may have at times been a deliberate attempt to radicalize Socinians. Whatever the reason, the historian must look beyond labels and common conceptions to the content of the theology.

Newton denied the Trinity and the Socinians were the most intellectually sophisticated anti-Trinitarians of his time. Yet, there exists no study that explores the possibility that Newton was attracted to Socinianism. From a practical point of view, this is not difficult to understand. No historian enjoys a mastery of both Newton's voluminous manuscripts (only fully available since their 1991 publication on microfilm) *and* the formidable Socinian corpus (difficult to access and still primarily untranslated). Also, some of the crucial evidence that I present here has until recently either lain undiscovered or been unavailable. Another deterrent to exploring a possible association with this greater heresy is the evidence that Newton — who believed in Christ's preexistence — was Christologically closer to Arianism than Socinianism. This need not be an obstacle; as we will see, it was no stumbling block to Newton himself.

### **Newton's Socinian Contacts**

Newton had contact with at least two men associated with Socinianism. First, sometime around 1689 Newton entered into theological dialogue with John Locke, whose appropriation of Socinian ideas is now beyond question.<sup>3</sup> The two

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<sup>2</sup>H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England (SSCE)*, Oxford, 1951, 119.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton*, Cambridge, 1980, 488-93. On Locke's appropriation of Socinian theological positions, see David Wootton,

were aware of each other's anti-Trinitarianism, for one result of their friendship was Newton sending his heretical confidante his letters on the Trinitarian corruptions for anonymous publication on the continent.<sup>4</sup> Locke himself had collected no less than forty-three Socinian books — a library of *Sociniana* remarkable for its size and scope.<sup>5</sup> It is thus possible that Locke, who had been purchasing and reading such works since 1679,<sup>6</sup> introduced Newton to Socinian writings.

Newton also met with Samuel Krell, Polish Brother and grandson of Socinian Johann Krell. In late 1725 Krell traveled to England to publish an anti-Trinitarian work that argued that the traditional reading of John 1:1b, “and the Word was God,” was a corruption of “and the Word was of God.”<sup>7</sup> A formerly unavailable letter from Krell to Newton shows that a meeting was arranged between the two in July 1726. Before the meeting, Krell sent Newton a list of propositions for the book, seeking Newton's patronage. Nor did Krell shy away from revealing the main thrust of the work: “if only Christian theologians had seen and acknowledged that Christ is nowhere in Scripture *expressly* called God...so many controversies about the Deity of Christ would not have been stirred up.”<sup>8</sup> This unequivocally anti-Trinitarian statement implies that Krell knew Newton's position — knowledge that may have come from Locke, with whom Krell had stayed in 1699.<sup>9</sup> Krell is also careful to assure Newton that his name would not be revealed if he offered support. Furthermore, the letter shows that Newton had “liberally” assisted Krell's return to Germany some fifteen years earlier.<sup>10</sup> This 1711 contact — significant in itself — was previously unknown. The July 1726 meeting was not the only personal encounter between the two aging heretics, for Krell later related that while in England, he had “spoken at different times” with Newton.<sup>11</sup> Krell also noted that Newton had “wished to read my book, and did read it, while it was going through the press, because it seemed

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“John Locke: Socinian or Natural Law Theorist?” in *Religion, Secularization and Political Thought: Thomas Hobbes to J.S. Mill*, ed. James E. Crimmins, London, 1990, 39-67 and John Marshall, *John Locke*, Cambridge, 1994, 342-50, 415-27.

<sup>4</sup> *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, ed. H.W. Turnbull, Cambridge, 1961, 3:83-149.

<sup>5</sup> See John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke* (Oxford, 1971), who do not, however, identify all Locke's Socinian works.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, *John Locke*, 138.

<sup>7</sup> Krell, *Initium Evangelii S. Joannis Apostoli*, London, 1726, A2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Krell to Newton, 16 July, 1726, Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek, Wallers autografsamling England och USA.

<sup>9</sup> *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E.S. De Beer, Oxford, 1981, 6:459-60, 466-7, 495, 576-7, 638.

<sup>10</sup> Krell to Newton, 16 July, 1726.

<sup>11</sup> Krell to M.V. de Lacroze, 17 July, 1727, *Thesauri epistolici Lacroziani*, Leipzig, 1742, 1:105.

to contain new things.”<sup>12</sup> What is more, Newton also placed ten guineas into Krell’s hand.<sup>13</sup> Since Newton’s library contained Krell’s volume, this support may have been related to Krell’s subscription drive. Newton’s multiple patronage of a Socinian is revealing and must not be ignored.

Newton did not believe Socinians were heretics. In his manuscript on church history Newton argues that those in the early Church who believed in Christ’s preexistence refused to call heretics those who did not, nor did they “think the difference between the two opinions material to the truth of the Christian religion.”<sup>14</sup> Citing Justin Martyr, Newton even says that it was not necessary “for the Christian religion” to prove “that Christ was God before the world began,” but only “that Jesus was the Christ of God.”<sup>15</sup> That this historical discussion is also a gloss on affairs in his own day is made plain in a subsequent folio, where Newton asserts that “the Churches have no more authority now to condemn & excommunicate” one who does not hold to the preexistence than “they had in the Apostles’ days.”<sup>16</sup> All of this helps explain why Newton had no trouble meeting with Christological Socinians: the preexistence was neither an essential doctrine nor worth dividing over.

### **Newton’s Socinian Library**

Newton also owned several Socinian publications. While Newton did not agree with every book he owned, and although his Socinian library in no way competes with Locke’s, it is still significant that he should possess eight Socinian books. Newton’s collection of *Sociniana* included four titles by Sozzini and one each by Johann Krell, Samuel Krell, Stanislaw Lubieniecki and Jonasz Szlichtyng. But Newton’s personal access to Socinian ideas was not limited to these eight explicitly Socinian books. He also possessed an anti-Trinitarian book by the Transylvanian Unitarian György Enyedi, who was heavily influenced by Sozzini and was in turn cited in the Polish Brethren’s *Racovian Catechism*. Additionally, Newton owned a copy of *The Faith of the One God*, which was made up of fifteen tracts by various Socinian-influenced writers. Finally, Newton’s library also included Christopher Sand’s *Nucleus historiae ecclesiasticae*. While rejecting Socinian Christological formulations, the German Arian accepted other ideas from the Socinians, such as irenicism, and includes accounts of Socinians in his *Nucleus*. Sand was also on good terms with Socinians such as Andzrej and Benedykt Wiszowaty, grandson and great-

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<sup>12</sup> Krell to de Lacroze, 17 July, 1727.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Jordan, *Recueil de literature*, Amsterdam, 1730, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Bodmer MS, 5A, 4r (cf. 1r).

<sup>15</sup> Bodmer MS, 5A, 3r.

<sup>16</sup> Bodmer MS, 5A, 7r; cf. Yahuda 15, 96r.

grandson of Sozzini.<sup>17</sup> This list, of course, represents the minimum of such books Newton possessed.

Newton also read these works, for several of them show signs of dog-earring. While there is no record of when Newton acquired this collection, the publishing dates are of some help. Six of the volumes were published before Newton's birth, but the rest were produced later and acquired in Newton's active years. References to both the Socinians and Sand in his "Two notable corruptions," along with another note on Sand, show that his reading of these authors was well under way by 1690.<sup>18</sup>

Newton was not restricted to works in his own library. First, Newton had access to books by the Socinians and Sand in Trinity College, which holds a range of such titles. Locke's extensive collection of *Sociniana* is crucial for the 1690s. For the London period, Newton's close friend Samuel Clarke, a near neighbor with whom he dined regularly and who published an anti-Trinitarian work in 1712, is important. Clarke possessed two sets of the Socinian collected works, the *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum (BFP)*.<sup>19</sup> Also, Clarke's patron Bishop John Moore held in his famous library almost seventy Socinian works.<sup>20</sup> Moore was rumored to be an anti-Trinitarian working with Clarke and Newton,<sup>21</sup> and was among the small group sent copies of the 1713 *Principia*.<sup>22</sup> That Newton had access to more Socinian books than he himself owned is important, for Newton's 1690 allusions to the Socinians and Sand were not to any works he himself owned.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as we will see, in the 1710s Newton almost certainly appropriated ideas out of a work by Johann Krell that he also did not possess, but that Locke, Clarke and Moore did. With Newton's access to *Sociniana* established, we now turn to consider whether ideas present in these works made their way into Newton's thought.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wallace, *Anti-Trinitarian Biography*, London, 1850, 3:325.

<sup>18</sup> Newton, *Correspondence*, 3:84, 89; Keynes MS 2, 19r.

<sup>19</sup> I recently discovered a newspaper sale catalogue of Clarke's library (which exists in no other form), and two sets of the *BFP* are included (*Daily Post*, Friday, 21 April, 1732 and Monday, 1 May, 1732).

<sup>20</sup> Cambridge MS Oo.7.49, 40r, 60r, 198v, 199r, 215r; Bodleian MS Add. D.81, 95v, 376r, 387v, 408r, 409r-409v, 414v, 443v, 454v, 455v; Bodleian MS Add. D.81\*, 108v, 266r.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wodrow, *Analecta*, Edinburgh, 1842-3, 2:285, 3:461.

<sup>22</sup> Newton, *Correspondence*, 5:413.

<sup>23</sup> I have traced the citation from Sand to that author's *Interpretationes paradoxæ quatuor Evangeliorum*, Amsterdam, 1670, 376-7, which is held by Trinity College.

### Parallels with Socinian Theology

Despite the fact that Newton, unlike the Socinians, believed in the premundane existence of Christ,<sup>24</sup> a number of his other positions on God and Christ reveal agreement. One constant theme that reverberates throughout the writings of both Newton and the Polish Brethren is the argument that only the Father is truly and uniquely God — based on such pivotal *loci biblici* as 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.<sup>25</sup> Early on, Newton had come to the conclusion that it was “a proper epithete of y<sup>e</sup> father to be called almighty,” and that “by God almighty we always understand y<sup>e</sup> Father.”<sup>26</sup> This is not all. Newton’s presentation of the Father as a God of dominion is also a Socinian commonplace,<sup>27</sup> as is Newton’s belief that Christ was God by office but not by nature.<sup>28</sup> Also, Newton followed the Socinians in asserting that the unity of the Father and the Son was moral, not a metaphysical one of essence.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, when Newton is not dealing directly with the preexistence, his characterizations of God and Christ are almost indistinguishable from those of Socinianism. Newton’s Christology was a blend of Arian and Socinian elements. Even Newton’s portrayal of the Holy Spirit as the spirit of prophecy may reveal Socinian influence,<sup>30</sup> as may his use of the term *Deus Optimus Maximus* for the supreme God (a title of Ciceronian origin much used by the Polish Brethren).<sup>31</sup>

It would be a mistake to assume, though, that Newton’s interest in Socinianism was limited to appropriating attractive anti-Trinitarian argumentation. Socinianism was a complete doctrinal system in which other unorthodox beliefs formed an integral part of the theological rationale. It is

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Keynes MS 3, 45r, Yahuda 15 *passim* and Bodmer MS *passim*. The extensive discussion of the preexistence in the latter two manuscripts shows that Newton was exercised by the subject — possibly as a result of his exposure to Socinian Christology.

<sup>25</sup> G.H. Williams, ed., *The Polish Brethren (PB)*, Missoula, 1980, 316, 392, 398; *The Racovian Catechism (RC)*, trans. Thomas Rees, London, 1818, 29, 34, 57, 151, 196; Stanisław Lubieniecki, *History of the Polish Reformation (HPR)*, ed. G.H. Williams, Minneapolis, 1995, 163; Johann Krell, *The Two Books...Touching One God the Father*, Kosmzburg, 1665, 13-22, 190, 214, 222; Keynes MS 2, XI; Keynes MS 8, 1r; Bodmer MS 1, 12r, 15.1, 29r.

<sup>26</sup> Yahuda MS 14, 25.

<sup>27</sup> See Bodmer MS, 1, 11r-12r, 5B, 7r-8r; *PB*, 391-4; *RC*, 25; *HPR*, 163. James E. Force has admirably demonstrated this key feature of Newton’s theology; the evidence presented in this article helps provide a source (see Force, “Newton’s God of Dominion: The Unity of Newton’s Theological, Scientific, and Political Thought,” in *idem* and Richard Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology*, Dordrecht, 1990, 75-102).

<sup>28</sup> Keynes 3, 45r; Bodmer MS, 5B, 7r-8r; *RC*, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Bodmer MS 5B, 7r; *RC*, 132-3.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Frank Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton*, Oxford, 1974, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Cambridge MS. Add. 3965, 542r; cf. *PB*, 574, 588 n.106, 665, 669 n.42, 674, 682 n.2.

important to note, therefore, that both the Socinians and Newton were mortalists who saw the teaching of the immortal soul, like the Trinity, as an unwarranted obtrusion upon primitive Christianity.<sup>32</sup> The denial of the eternity of hell torments, often an ancillary position to mortalism, was also a part of the Socinian system and rumored to be of Newton's as well.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Newton and the Socinians both held to believers' baptism.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, both Newton and the Socinians argued for the separation of church and state.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a major tenet of Socinianism was their irenicism and advocacy of religious toleration.<sup>36</sup> This, too, is found in Newton's writings.<sup>37</sup> This exercise in extending the parallels with Socinianism beyond positions centered around the Trinitological problematic is crucial. The more complicated and nuanced the doctrinal profile aligned with Socinianism, the greater the likelihood of a match and the greater the extent of possible theological appropriation.

### Anti-Trinitarian View of Church History

Newton's view of ecclesiastical history underpinned and justified his anti-Trinitarianism. Newton involved himself in a sustained endeavor to deconstruct the received history of the Trinitarian victors and replace it with an account that vindicated the divine legitimacy of his anti-Trinitarian faith. Part of this project involved explaining the origin of false doctrines through the obtrusion of philosophy, metaphysics and credal tradition. Socinian historians had trodden this path decades before Newton.<sup>38</sup> When we turn to consider a source for Newton's view of church history, the most obvious would appear to be his own innovation. Indeed, a legitimizing *apologia historica* is a necessary corollary to the advocacy of a minority doctrinal position. But the existence in his library of a dog-eared copy of Sand's *Nucleus* suggests a more complicated process of inspiration. Sand's *Nucleus* was a work of great erudition and was respected by a

<sup>32</sup> *PB*, 112-22, 363-65; Clark MS, 54r-55r; James E. Force, "The God of Abraham and Isaac (Newton)," Force and Popkin, eds., *The Books of Nature and Scripture*, Dordrecht, 1994, 179-200.

<sup>33</sup> *PB*, 105, 115, 119-20, 364; cf. *RC*, 367; William Whiston, *The Eternity of Hell Torments Consider'd*, London, 1740, 49. Whiston's assertions are strengthened by the fact that Newton held mortalist convictions.

<sup>34</sup> See *PB*, 21-2, 446-57, 624-5; *RC*, 249-62; *HPR*, 373-6; Keynes MS 3, 1, 3, 9-11, 23, 31, 43, 44; Keynes MS 6, 1; Bodmer MS, 2, 22r, 15.1, 19r.

<sup>35</sup> Yahuda MS 39; *RR*, 1282-4.

<sup>36</sup> *PB*, 291-302, 342-54, 559-81.

<sup>37</sup> Keynes MS 3; Yahuda 15, 154r.

<sup>38</sup> See *HPR*, 80-7, 190-3, 199-201, 248-50, 275, 336-7. See also Lech Szczucki, "Socinian Historiography in the Late Seventeenth Century," in F.F. Church and Timothy George, eds., *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History*, Leiden, 1979, 285-300.

range of scholars, including the orthodox.<sup>39</sup> Its chief purpose was “to reinstate the ‘Arian’ and ‘Arianizing’ currents in the history of Christianity.”<sup>40</sup> This is exactly the historiographical program of Newton. Thus it is not surprising that to add to the evidence of thematic parallels we also have physical and manuscript evidence that Newton had studied Sand and was familiar with his writings by no later than 1690. But this is not all. Sand’s philosophy of history was almost certainly influenced by Socinian historiography and his works contain extracts from Socinian accounts of church history. But Newton also had direct access to Socinian ecclesiastical history in their own writings and the parallels are remarkable.

First, we see in both the Socinians and Newton an intense study of the early Church and an acute sensitivity to doctrinal anachronism. Both the Socinians and Newton desired to recover the primitive truth of Christianity,<sup>41</sup> and both desired a second reformation. Socinians, like Newton, argued that corruptions of language and *novitas verborum* were the primary causes of division in the Church.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in Socinian historiography, as with Newton, the invention of the novel term *homoousia* was an evil blight on the Church.<sup>43</sup> With both the Socinians and Newton, one of the main corruptions was the introduction of Greek philosophy and metaphysics.<sup>44</sup> And for this Newton blamed both Athanasius and Arius.<sup>45</sup> The Socinian Benedykt Wyszowaty argued in an extremely apologetic work that the primitive truth was preserved by a remnant, for only a chosen few can “discover the supreme good, which is divine truth; the masses, on the other hand...will never choose ‘the best things.’”<sup>46</sup> The Englishman Paul Best, who had converted to Socinianism while traveling in eastern Europe,<sup>47</sup> argued that the Trinity was a corruption of Rome and a primary element of the great apostasy predicted in the Apocalypse.<sup>48</sup> Best wrote that “we may perceive how by iniquity of time the reall truth of God hath been trodden under foot by a verball kinde of Divinity, introduced by the Semi-pagan Christians of the third Century in the Western Church.”<sup>49</sup> Like Newton, Best laid the chief blame for introducing the

<sup>39</sup> Szczucki, “Socinian Historiography,” 293.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>41</sup> *PB*, 560; Bodmer MS, *passim*.

<sup>42</sup> Dariusz Jarmola, “The Origins and Development of Believers’ Baptism among Polish Brethren in the Sixteenth Century,” PhD dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990, 60; Bodmer MS, 5, 1r-2r, 8, 1r.; Yahuda 15, 154r.

<sup>43</sup> *HPR*, 248-9; Clark MS, *passim*; Keynes MS 10, *passim*.

<sup>44</sup> *HPR*, 274-8; Bodmer MS, 5A, 1r-2r, 7r, 5B, 7r, 8, 1r; Yahuda 15, 79r, 97r, 154r, 170r.

<sup>45</sup> Yahuda MS 15, 154r.

<sup>46</sup> Szczucki, “Socinian Historiography,” 294.

<sup>47</sup> *SSCE*, 149-62.

<sup>48</sup> Best, *Mysteries Discovered*, London, 1647, 5, 10-13.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



Trinity against the Latin Church. Best was also outraged against those who set up new creeds without warrant.<sup>50</sup> The Socinian invective against the introduction of philosophy into the Church and their pronounced remnant theology are hauntingly similar to positions that Newton held. That Newton's plot of church history manifests the same interpretative contours as that of the Socinians is suggestive — especially since it was such an uncommon approach.

### **Anti-Trinitarian Textual Criticism**

Newton also engaged in anti-Trinitarian textual criticism. The Socinians were adept textual critics and early on had recognized, with Erasmus, that the *comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7) was an interpolation.<sup>51</sup> The Socinians were eager to use this discipline to remove apparent scriptural contradictions in order to uphold the Word of God,<sup>52</sup> and a major element of this drive involved expunging Trinitarian corruptions. This is also seen in Newton's "Two notable corruptions," for Newton's effort was not a straightforward exercise in textual criticism: it was an attempt to expose unwarranted infiltrations of doctrinal *novae* into the sacred text. Newton's description of the two verses as "corruptions" reveals this intention. His motivations are also demonstrated by the fact that he searched through the writings of the Socinians and Sand for evidence. Finally, his continued interest in anti-Trinitarian textual criticism is shown by his desire to read Krell's book near the end of his life.

### **Scriptural Hermeneutics**

Biblical interpretation offers one of the most striking parallels between Newton and the Socinians. Newton made several comments on the use of reason in interpreting the Scriptures that are reminiscent of Socinian exegetical principles. Newton wrote that "the human race is prone to mysteries, and holds nothing so holy and perfect as that which cannot be understood...It is the concern of theologians that the conception [of God] be made as easy and reasonable as possible."<sup>53</sup> Like the Socinians, Newton believed that the Scriptures are reasonable and composed in the tongue of the common people.<sup>54</sup> Thus, there is an *expectation* that the Bible is written in plain and lucid language. Moreover, Newton shares that distinctively Socinian hermeneutic of interpreting more difficult passages with those more easily understood, stating that "in disputable places" of Scripture he loved "to take up with what I can best understand."<sup>55</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Krell, *One God*, 186, 244; *RC*, 39-42; *RR*, 645.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *RC*, 17-18, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Cambridge MS. Add. 3965, 546r (translated from Latin); cf. Krell, *One God*, 245.

<sup>54</sup> Krell, *One God*, 245; Jarmola 60, 62; Yahuda MS 15, 99r.

<sup>55</sup> Newton, *Correspondence*, 3:108; cf. Keynes MS 5, 1r-2r.

one of his prophetic manuscripts, Newton also lays down several “Rules of Interpretation” intended to determine “when an interpretation is genuine & of two interpretations which is the best.”<sup>56</sup> These are the same methods encouraged by Socinian writers, who argue that “more obscure passages of Scripture” are to be understood “by an attentive comparison of them with similar phrases and sentences of less ambiguous meaning.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Best argues that the standard Trinitarian tactic is to resort to “difficult and figurative texts to confirm their inventions,” an approach he rejects in favor of a methodology in which “that which is most plain, common and commanded is the measure of that which is more difficult and obscure.”<sup>58</sup>

Newton shared the Socinian belief in the unity and simplicity of God’s Word. In a direct allusion to his studies of nature, Newton said that he chose biblical interpretations that “without straining reduce things to the greatest simplicity...Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, & not in y<sup>e</sup> multiplicity & confusion of things.”<sup>59</sup> Some scholars have pointed to analogies between Newton’s biblical hermeneutics and his natural philosophical methodology.<sup>60</sup> Here Newton’s four “Rules of reasoning in philosophy” are important. In Rules II and III, Newton argues for the unity of phenomena in nature and that one infers general principles from the observation of specifics.<sup>61</sup> This is roughly analogous to the Socinian hermeneutic in which the meaning of ambiguous texts is induced from those that are apparent. The desire for simplicity is also found in Newton’s reading of nature, as Newton writes in Rules I and III that “Nature is pleased with simplicity” and “wont to be simple.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, Newton’s professed desire to avoid introducing hypotheses in natural philosophy aligns with his suspicion of infusing metaphysics into Scripture — a principle he shared with the biblicist Socinians. Here strict biblicism sounds a lot like strict empiricism. Newton thus employed similar methods in his interpretation of the Books of Scripture and Nature. These were ideals, so the fact that Newton did not always hold to them in no way detracts from my argument. It is difficult to ascertain, though, if what we see here is influence from Socinianism on his science, influence of his science on his hermeneutics or simple affinity of style (which, however, may have served to reinforce Newton’s interest in Socinianism). Further research is needed to

<sup>56</sup> Yahuda MS 1, 10r.

<sup>57</sup> RC, 18; cf. Sozzini, *De Jesu Christo Servatore*, Raków, 1594, 261; Jarmola 62.

<sup>58</sup> Best, *Mysteries Discovered*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Yahuda MS 1, 14r.

<sup>60</sup> See especially, Marizio Mamiani, “The Rhetoric of Certainty: Newton’s Method in Science and in the Interpretation of the Apocalypse,” in *Persuading Science*, ed. Marcello Pera and W.R. Shea, Canton, 1991, 157-72.

<sup>61</sup> Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Andrew Motte, London, 1968, 399.

<sup>62</sup> Newton, *Principles*, 398.

determine if Socinian hermeneutics informed aspects of Newton's scientific method. This may be a long shot; what is presented next is not.

### Socinianism in the Scholium

The evidence presented thus far has served as preparation for the major claim of this article: that there are Socinianisms in the General Scholium to Newton's *Principia*. Very little has been offered on sources for the theology present in this document, other than the observation made by some that the material is anti-Trinitarian — possibly of the Arian variety. Our first clue comes from the pen of fiery Calvinist divine John Edwards. In 1714 Edwards not only accused Newton of attacking the Trinity in the General Scholium, but also raised the specter of Socinianism. Edwards, who knew his Socinianism,<sup>63</sup> claimed that the notion of God as a relative term had been lifted out of the thirteenth chapter of Johann Krell's *De Deo et ejus attributis*.<sup>64</sup> No scholar has yet followed through with the implications of this accusation; I want to argue that we must take the allegation seriously.

Trinitarians posit that the term God is absolute and refers to essence. Socinians countered by arguing that it is relative, referring to dominion and office. To support this contention, they drew attention to *loci biblici* where ordinary human beings, such as rulers, are called God (Psalm 82:6 being an example cited by Christ in John 10:34). Socinians held that the word God is used only of the Father in the absolute, underived sense, while it is used of Christ, angels and some humans in a derived sense. In either case, the term obtains its meaning from dominion and power. Krell makes this point in chapter thirteen of his *De Deo*:

because the term God...is fond of...additional clause[s]...which relation is signified to the others, as when God is said to be God of this or that...it is easily understood, that that term is neither by nature particular, nor does it signify God's essence itself...Why therefore is God so frequently called God of these or those? Certainly because *the term God is principally a name of power and empire*.<sup>65</sup>

This is *exactly* the argument presented in Newton's 1713 General Scholium. In reasoning that the universe must be "subject to the dominion of One,"<sup>66</sup> Newton claims that "[God] governs all things...as Lord over all; and on account

<sup>63</sup> Edwards had correctly identified Locke's Socinian tendencies in the 1690s.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards, *Some Brief Critical Remarks on Dr. Clarke's Last Papers*, London, 1714, 36-7.

<sup>65</sup> Krell, *De Deo et ejus attributes*, n.p., 1631, 100. The portion cited by Edwards is in italics.

<sup>66</sup> Newton, *Principles*, 544. The characterization of God as "(the) One" is itself a commonplace in Socinian literature (cf. *PB*, 312).

of his dominion he is wont to be called *Lord God* or *Universal Ruler*; for God is a relative word, and has a respect to servants...It is the dominion of a spiritual being which constitutes a God."<sup>67</sup> This presentation of God as a relative word is, as Edwards noted, found in chapter thirteen of Krell's *De Deo*.<sup>68</sup> And, as Edwards implied, so is the God of dominion.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, in his 1726 third edition Newton added a note to this passage that points out that:

princes are called *gods*, *Psal.* lxxxii. ver. 6; and *John* x. ver. 35. And *Moses* is called a *god* to his brother *Aaron*, and a *god* to *Pharaoh* (*Exod.* iv. ver. 16; and vii. ver. 1). And in the same sense the souls of dead princes were formerly, by the Heathens, called *gods*, but falsely, because of their want of dominion.<sup>70</sup>

This otherwise inexplicable notion that persons other than the supreme God can be called God is a classic Socinian anti-Trinitarian argument that is found in the very chapter of Krell's *De Deo* identified by Edwards.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, three of the four proof texts Newton employed to support the argument are also found in exactly the same chapter.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the argument about false gods is also virtually identical to what we find in another of Krell's writings.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, even after being accused of Socinianism, Newton added further Socinian teachings to the third edition of the Scholium, perhaps — in one case — from the very same chapter identified by Edwards. These parallels are simply too close and the theology too distinctly Socinian for this to be a coincidence. Nor does the fact that Newton did not possess a copy of Krell's *De Deo* argue against this. His friend Clarke had two copies of the *BFP*, which included the work. Also, the argumentation and small *florilegium* of scriptural references are all Socinian *topoi* typical of the Socinian hermeneutical profile.<sup>74</sup> No other theologians were presenting concepts like these. Edwards was right: there is Socinianism in the General Scholium.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Newton, *Principles*, 544; cf. Bodmer MS, 5B, 8r, 15.1, 29r.

<sup>68</sup> Krell, *De Deo*, 89-102.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2. See also chapter 23, 161-91.

<sup>70</sup> Newton, *Principles*, 544 n.\*; cf. Keynes MS 3, 45r; Bodmer MS, 5B 8r.

<sup>71</sup> Krell, *De Deo*, 94-9.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-6, 99.

<sup>73</sup> Krell, *One God*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *HPR*, 161-5; *PB*, 104; Best, 2, 5, 8.

<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that Newton's primary intention was to present Socinianism in the *Principia*, only that Newton used Socinian exegesis to further his broader goals for the General Scholium.

### **Newton's Engagement with Socinianism**

Newton's generally Arian Christology did not bar him from appropriating Socinian ideas. And since Newton was familiar with Socinian writings by 1690, included Socinian arguments in the 1713 and 1726 editions of his *Principia*, and bought and read a Socinian book only months before his death, his engagement with Socinianism was no passing fancy. Mere verbal parallels do not prove Socinian inspiration. Newton's theology was hammered out primarily on the anvil of Scripture and some of his Socinianesque ideas may derive from latitudinarian currents within Anglicanism. For this reason I have gone beyond simple parallels to elucidate multiple lines of evidence, including Socinian contacts, ownership of *Sociniana* and similarity of intentions. Moreover, some of the parallel ideas are *distinctly* Socinian. Furthermore, the direction of influence in the case of the General Scholium strengthens the likelihood that Socinianism might be found elsewhere in Newton's thought. Nor did Newton use Socinianism slavishly: he followed them neither in their denial of the preexistence of Christ nor their anti-millenarianism. Newton was an eclectic theologian who added to his own innovation ideas from several theological streams. Thus, it should not be surprising that Newton would be attracted to the Socinians' rich anti-Trinitarian culture, nor that he would want to access the sophisticated argumentation of the most intellectually advanced anti-Trinitarian movement of his age. It was probably also very important for Newton that the Socinians were not tainted by the Christological controversies of the fourth century. Finally, scholars of Newton's theology and natural philosophy must take seriously his use of Socinianism — particularly because it helps explain so much of his thought. One suspects that the last word has not been said on Isaac Newton and Socinianism.