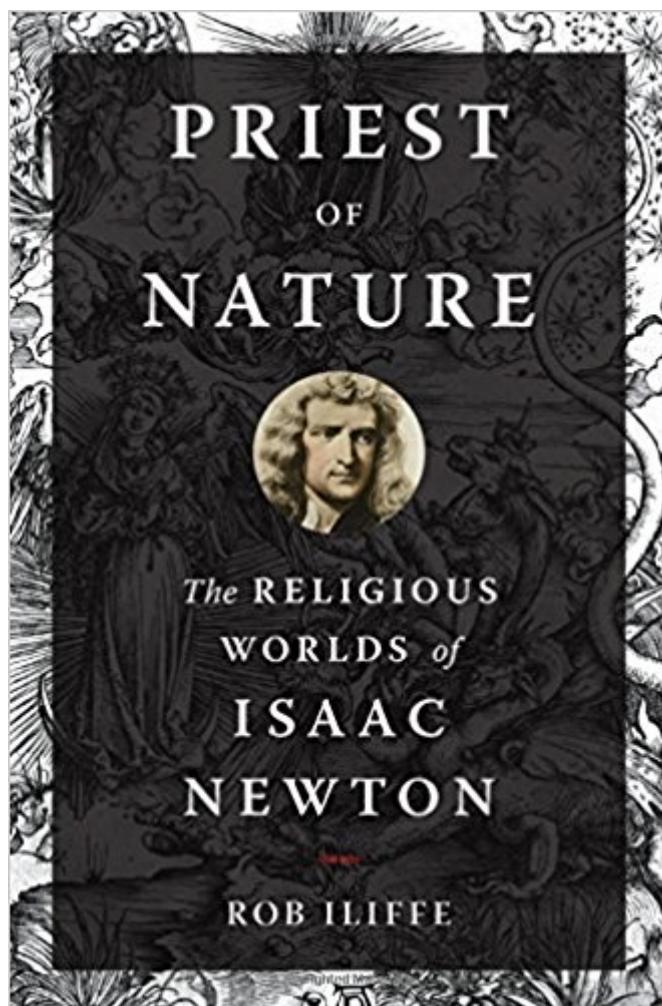


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# Priest Of Nature: The Religious Worlds Of Isaac Newton



## Synopsis

After Sir Isaac Newton revealed his discovery that white light was compounded of more basic colored rays, he was hailed as a genius and became an instant international celebrity. An interdisciplinary enthusiast and intellectual giant in a number of disciplines, Newton published revolutionary, field-defining works that reached across the scientific spectrum, including the *Principia Mathematica* and *Opticks*. His renown opened doors for him throughout his career, ushering him into prestigious positions at Cambridge, the Royal Mint, and the Royal Society. And yet, alongside his public success, Newton harbored religious beliefs that set him at odds with law and society, and, if revealed, threatened not just his livelihood but his life. Religion and faith dominated much of Newton's life and work. His papers, never made available to the public, were filled with biblical speculation and timelines along with passages that excoriated the early Church fathers. Indeed, his radical theological leanings rendered him a heretic, according to the doctrines of the Anglican Church. Newton believed that the central concept of the Trinity was a diabolical fraud and loathed the idolatry, cruelty, and persecution that had come to define religion in his time. Instead, he proposed a "simple Christianity"--a faith that would center on a few core beliefs and celebrate diversity in religious thinking and practice. An utterly original but obsessively private religious thinker, Newton composed several of the most daring works of any writer of the early modern period, works which he and his inheritors suppressed and which have been largely inaccessible for centuries. In *Priest of Nature*, historian Rob Iliffe introduces readers to Newton the religious animal, deepening our understanding of the relationship between faith and science at a formative moment in history and thought. Previous scholars and biographers have generally underestimated the range and complexity of Newton's religious writings, but Iliffe shows how wide-ranging his observations and interests were, spanning the entirety of Christian history from Creation to the Apocalypse. Iliffe's book allows readers to fully engage in the theological discussion that dominated Newton's age. A vibrant biography of one of history's towering scientific figures, *Priest of Nature* is the definitive work on the spiritual views of the man who fundamentally changed how we look at the universe.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 536 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (July 10, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199995354

ISBN-13: 978-0199995356

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 1.7 x 6.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #99,509 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #140 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Science & Religion #233 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Great Britain #240 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Scientists

## Customer Reviews

"[W]hile other biographies acknowledge that Newton possessed a sincere, though heterodox, faith, Mr. Iliffe serves up the most complicated picture to date of the faith itself. He completely recasts the relationship of Newton's scientific inquiry to his religious beliefs, tying the two together to an unparalleled degree....Mr. Iliffe presents a syncretism in Newton's thinking that eludes simple classification....Mr. Iliffe also attends carefully to neglected periods of Newton's life, including the teen years he spent laboring in an apothecary's workshop and his stints as a Member of Parliament. Attention to such detail, woven deftly into a finely constructed and well-written narrative, makes Mr. Iliffe's 'Priest of Nature' a robust portrait with broad appeal. Both the academic and lay reader will appreciate how, in shattering the simplistic Enlightenment account of Newton, the book reveals the flexibility of the great man's capacious mind."--David Davis, *Wall Street Journal*"This book is an enormous contribution to the Newton literature and the history of science in general. It examines huge numbers of sources that were, until now, essentially unknown and provides an unparalleled contextualization of the man and his work."--*Science*"The author thoroughly examines Newton's religious papers, which were unpublished during the inventor's lifetime, including writings on natural theology, religious doctrine, prophecy, and heresy... Iliffe's challenging and scholarly work addresses an important and long overlooked aspect of Newton."--*Library Journal*"Iliffe's fascinating study provides an absorbing glimpse into Newton's work and early modern culture."--*Publishers Weekly*"For too long, historians have evaluated Isaac Newton's theological writings wholly in relation to his mathematical and natural philosophical work--first, as an embarrassing obsession, best passed over in silence; then, as a sideshow, taken up when his intellectual powers were fading; more recently, as an influence on properly scientific pursuits. Rob Iliffe knows the range of Newton's unpublished and published writings better than any other living scholar, and he gives us here a stunningly well-read, original, and provocative account of a thinker who struggled with

theological matters throughout his life and whose reflections on right religion and on the sources of right knowledge emerged from the heart of his self-understanding. Priest of Nature is well titled: it radically redraws the picture of Newton we have long been offered."--Steven Shapin, Franklin L. Ford Research Professor of the History of Science, Harvard University"Newton wrote importantly about physics, optics, and mathematics and wrote copiously about alchemy, but he saved his most intense thoughts and passionate investigation for perfecting his theology. In Priest of Nature Rob Iliffe restores Newton to an age of political upheaval and religious anxiety, portraying him as a godly man endlessly in search of truth, prophecy, and history. Newton's lifelong struggle to combat the perceived corruption of Christianity with the tools of faith and reason comes to life in this thought-provoking and deeply researched history. A must read for any serious scholar of Newton."--Paula Findlen, Stanford University

Rob Iliffe is Professor of History at the University of Oxford. He is the General Editor of the online Newton Project and the author of *Newton: A Very Short Introduction*.

His writings in natural philosophy were marked by his strict division between what could be proved with mathematical certainty, and what was merely conjectural or hypothetical. Among the latter he classed the systems of Aristotle and Descartes, as well as any scientific theories that lacked empirical support. (15) Newton's mathematical science changed the mentality of the world. His religious writing is just now appearing. (16) Although he denied that religious truths could be proved with mathematical certainty, he drew an almost identical distinction between what was really in Scripture and what was added to it by false traditions or by the artificial productions of the human imagination. (15) Aristotle was a scientific roadblock. Newton finished removing his science and opened the way. Aristotle and especially other Greeks were also a religious barrier to genuine Christianity. Newton spent decades in the prime of life overcoming that block. This work is still in progress. (16) Indeed, his extensive analysis of the early Christian Church was premised on the view that the greatest and most audacious conspiracy of all time (16) "the joint introduction into Christianity of the doctrine of the Trinity and of various beliefs and practices that would form the basis of Roman Catholicism" had corrupted the true religion to the core. The manner in which he investigated the early church owed much to his underlying character, but this, in turn, was both shaped by his immersion in a bygone textual world and fueled by his relations with those around him. (6) Newton's zealous, even overwhelming, determination to restore genuine Christianity drove him to - what we consider unbelievable

exertion. Newton's religious values governed his conduct not only in religious study but also in his other intellectual arenas. In the introduction to the same prophetic treatise in which he stated that religious truths could not be mathematically demonstrated, he argued that only a special, select cadre of experts was capable of properly understanding difficult things "the strong & eminent" of technically demanding doctrine. Such people were not led by interest, education, or human authorities, and they set themselves sincerely & earnestly to search after truth. (15) Newton's careful sense of what can be shown (observed) and what is just fancy (imagination) controlled both his scientific and religious work. Indeed, the very fact that his papers survived his death, that is, the fact that he did not burn the most egregiously heterodox texts, indicates something about his understanding both of their significance and their intended audience. It is probable that he believed that the content of these papers would have some beneficial effect long after he had died, when his work would conceivably form part of the great dispersion of the gospel that would precede Christ's Second Coming. (10) Interesting Newton's insight. Understood the end was not then, but foresaw a worldwide dispersion of the gospel. Newton's extensive writings on the Trinitarian corruption of Christianity are among the most daring works of any writer in the early modern period, and they would merit careful study even if they had not been composed by the author of the Principia. (10) Anti-trinitarian research and writings form a large part of this book. Newton's overwhelming drive to find real, authentic, genuine, Christianity impelled him to decades of unremitting effort. However, what marks out Newton's writings are the independence of thought they display. If they had been unveiled to the Republic of Letters when he wrote them, and his authorship revealed, he would now be part of an elite pantheon of original thinkers who are lauded as part of a Radical Reformation or Radical Enlightenment. However, like William Whiston, his successor in the Lucasian chair, he would have been immediately expelled from his college. He would never have had the chance to write the Principia or Opticks, and much, if not all, of his pioneering work on the calculus might have been lost. (10) Introduction: A Rational Christian 1. A Divine Web 2. A Spiritual Ant 3. Infinity and the Imagination 4. From Liberty to Heresy 5. Abominable Men 6. Prisca Newtoniana 7. Methodising the Apocalypse 8. Divine Persecution 9. The End of the World 10. Private Prosecutions 11. Critical Friends 12. A Particle of Divinity. Newton saw himself predominantly as a devout Christian, whose calling was to use his intelligence to discern the truth in whatever field he studied. He repeatedly stated his opinion, and let it be known, that there was nothing more important for a Christian than the study of the

Bible, the interpretation of prophecy, and the examination of church history. (23) How many Christians hold this opinion today? He also found that he had a particular gift for studying mathematics and natural philosophy to an extraordinarily high level, but most of his working life was spent studying religious topics. He believed that he had a fundamental obligation to use his formidable reasoning powers to divine the truth, and he deployed these faculties as much in his study of the visions of Revelation as he did in creating the theories and techniques underlying calculus and universal gravitation. In so doing, he set out to address the great questions about the origins and nature of the universe, the place of humans within it, and the meaning of their lives, all of which in his time were inevitably posed and solved within a religious framework.

(23) After Newton, mathematical science is the framework. Fascinating that Newton did not believe that! Newton believed that the perfection of the understanding involved the relentless study of sacred texts and the rational examination of the cosmos. His preface to his early treatise on the Apocalypse was saturated with scriptural references to the understanding, for he believed that God had given his people prophesies so that they might be understood in the latter times. (399) Understood later! Not him, but someone else! (Matthew 24:45 - Who really is the faithful and discreet slave whom his master appointed over his domestics, to give them their food at the proper time?) Daniel had foretold (12:4, 9-10) that at the end of time, the wise, and not the wicked, would understand, and from this Newton inferred that true understanding could only be achieved by the pure of heart who had attained real wisdom. The godly, he said, should engage in the constant study of Scripture in order to fully understand their faith, so that they might choose and profess that religion they judged to be the most true. Acquiring a mature and more perfect understanding through constant reading and meditation would add assurance and vigour to faith. (399) This so...so...different! This work was a necessary but not sufficient condition for grasping core truths, since human wisdom was ineffective without God's help. As Newton put it, it was difficult for the wise to understand the truths of religion, given that they were so prepossessed with their own imaginations and too engrossed with worldly designs. Ultimately, true understanding of prophecy was a gift of God; if the wise were to understand, they had to purify themselves from sin before they could accept God's offer. (399) This new research offers a lot. The non-religious or even the anti-religious will have some preconceptions shattered. The orthodox Christian believer likewise will suffer shattering insights. The devout, Bible reading, sincere, serious student of Christianity and its real origins and history will be delighted and deepen his faith. Includes a thirty page bibliography with about fourteen hundred references. Astounding! Also a twenty five page index with each linked to

text. Great. Twenty plates of Newton's own work and charts. Fascinating! Last paragraph - "Ultimately, Newton's early life (to say nothing of his last three decades) was suffused with an overriding religious purpose. Convinced that he had been created in the Image of God, his scholarly life was in part an exercise in examining how he measured up to his maker. As such, it focussed both on perfecting himself and on understanding the works of God." "Accordingly, he strove to make his life that of a godly man, avoiding the temptations of the imagination and its chief effects, idolatry, idleness, and lust. He condemned the imaginary products of human artifice and instead nurtured his understanding so that he could dedicate himself to studying the divine truths of Scripture and Nature." "The relentless cultivation of his own intellect was the precondition for gaining a mature wisdom, along with a purified will that could make the correct choice between good and evil, and between true and false religion. It was also this heroic intellectual labour that produced the monumental works in theology, natural philosophy, and mathematics that survive today." (See also - "The limitations of science", by Louis More. More is a physics professor who meditated on the same issue as Newton, the difference between observations and conclusions. Great!)

This book is for religious historians and theological scholars rather than the curious general reader or, as in my case, the science historian seeking some further background of a giant among physicists. While the essence of Newton as analytical theologian is his low regard for rather arbitrary church doctrines instituted long after the era of founding Christianity and the particular concept of making the rebellious rabbinic teacher into not only a deity but synonymous of God via the Trinity, the exceedingly detailed account of Newton's religious doubt and investigations is tedious. What becomes evident is that his work on optics and forces of attraction and movement was secondary to his deeper interest in religion. He saw the laws of Nature as the work of God, in comparison to Spinoza's holistic equivalency. Science today is not at war with religion, and the vast majority of scientists are religious or have adapted spiritual philosophies in which their experimental and observational research are accommodated. The Mystery remains be it the ways of nature or its origins. I wanted to learn more about Newton's own approach but I was overwhelmed by the minutiae of church history. I afterwards donated the book to a nearby Episcopalian church where the rector might be more appreciative.

This is a well-researched and well-written book about Isaac Newton's examination of Church history. Newton, via his research, did not believe in the divinity of Jesus or the Trinity. He believed that Christianity fell off the rails in the fourth century with Emperor Constantine and the Nicene

Council of AD 325. The main persona responsible was Athanasius of Alexandria, who Iliffe claims was a murderer, liar, forger, and thief. Excellent reading, especially for anyone interested in Church history. Newton is a modern-day Unitarian. Kameel Nasr is author of Son of the Last Martyrs, about the rise of the church in the fourth century.

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