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THE MONARCHIAN THEOLOGY OF ISAAC NEWTON

A Study of the Newtonian Theological and Scientific Papers

Tutor:

Wilhelm DANCĂ, PhD

PhD Candidate:

Remus Gabriel MANOILĂ

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SUMMARY

Isaac Newton (1644 – 1727) is remembered by posterity as the father of the modern Physics, but his interests in Theology, Church History or Ancient History, Alchemy, as well as Biblical Hermeneutics remained almost unknown until the last decades. The unpublished work of the famous natural philosopher contains dozens of manuscripts in the aforementioned areas, his historical and theological writings counting more than all mathematical, natural philosophical and optical papers.

In our study we paid special attention to the manuscripts on Theology and Church history and to the connections that can be made between these writings and the natural philosophy ones. An undertaking of this kind starts most of the times from the second edition of the *Principia*, the work in which Newton makes public for the first time a theological assertion. The *General Scholium*, the addenda of the 1713 *Principia*, is considered “possibly the most famous of all Newton’s writings” (Cohen: 1971, 241). Here, in probably the most famous fragments of one of the most important work in the history of science, Newton makes his well-known theological argument: “this most elegant system of the sun, planets and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being”(Newton: 1713, 482). The statement does not remain in the classical limits of natural theology, but it is elaborated in the following fragments, receiving biblical references and theological connotations.

He rules all things, not as the world soul but as the lord of all. And because of his dominion he is called Lord God *Pantokrator*. For “god” is a relative word and has reference to servants, and godhood is the lordship of God, not over his own body as is supposed by those for whom God is the world soul, but over servants. (Newton, 1999: 940).

“The dominion of *One*” is identified with the dominion of the God of the Scriptures, “God of gods and Lord of lords” (Scholium Generale 1726, cf. Deuteronom X, 17); the powerful and intelligent Being which governs the physical Universe is, to Newton, the *Pantokrator* of Saint John’s Apocalypse (I, 8), and the Deity does not constitute the nature of divinity, but what does is the rule of God over the world, itself. Thus, the most recent research in Newtonian studies define the *General Scholium*, firstly as a “theologically charged appendix” to the main work of natural philosophy of Isaac Newton (Snobelen: 2001, 170). The concept of dominion, as it is exposed in the addenda of the *Principia*, has a theological meaning, it is the expression of the effective governance or of God’s providence over the physical Universe, over the history of humankind and the definition

of the essence of divine perfections: “The lordship of a spiritual being constitutes a god [...] And from true lordship it follows that the true God is living, intelligent and powerfull” (Newton: 1999, 941). This is why, just as we argued in our research, the notion of “dominion” is associated to the theological concept of “Lord God of dominion” (*Dominus Deus, dominatio Dei*).

The main novelty in re-editing the *Principia* in 1713, alongside some emendations and additions in the initial corpus of the work, is as such constituted by the final chapter, the *General Scholium*. This piece has the role of a conclusive appendix in which some corollaries of natural philosophy, methodology, metaphysics, and theology are underlined, which Newton considered implicit even from the first edition of the *Principia* (Newton: 1959–77: 3, 361, 384). In this way, the Scholium offers concise observations regarding gravity, planetary movement, space, the induction based method, active forces and electricity, theological and metaphysical topics, Cartesian natural philosophy or the plurality of worlds.

Regarding the God of dominion and its implications in Isaac Newton’s thought, recent studies have considerably renewed the understanding of the theological dimension of the *Scholium* and, consequently, the unity of the Newtonian thought. In an article published in 1990, James E. Force defined the concept of “God of dominion” as a common denominator for the theological, scientific and political conceptions of Newton, concluding that “his theology, not just his religion, influences his science every bit as much as his science influences the rigorous textual scholarship of his theology” (Force: 1990, 78). We find a similar argument put forward by B. J. T. Dobbs, underlining the theological goals of the whole Newtonian work, since Newton was motivated in the study of nature of a theological desideratum, that of knowing the mysteries of how God acts in the creation (Dobbs: 1991, 253–4). Richard Westfall notices a religious influence, not a theological one, over the Newtonian science. In connection with the relationship between theology and science, the historian considers that the latter manifests a greater influence and it determines the heterodox character of Newton’s theology (Westfall: 1982, 139–140). Stephen Snobelen brings into the discussion the methodological correspondences between Newton’s natural philosophy writings and the theological ones. The Canadian historian emphasises an “epistemological dualism” of the “relative” and “absolute” values, employed both in the *Principia*, and in the biblical exegesis (Snobelen: 2001, 202–7). Rob Iliffe and Steffen Ducheyne insist on the disciplinary differentiation in the epistemological and methodological analysis, as a premise in the theorization of the conceptual links between the different areas of interest in Newton (Iliffe: 2004, 451 and Ducheyne: 2012, 280–1). The *General Scholium* remains, therefore, the premise of Isaac Newton’s unity of thought; he reserves the widest space in both editions of *Principia*’s addenda for the concept of

“God of dominion”. In this sense, the overcoming of the cognitive barriers between the different intellectual approaches of Newton represents the current tendency in which the work of the famous natural philosopher (both the published and the unpublished one) is reconfigured.

In this paper (*The theological monarchianism of Isaac Newton. A study of the Newtonian theological and scientific manuscripts*), I first analysed the potential theological sources of the “God of dominion” concept, and subsequently I exposed its implications in the Theology, Natural Philosophy and Biblical Hermeneutics in Isaac Newton’s writings.

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