ISAAC NEWTON, SOCINIANISM
AND “THE ONE SUPREME GOD”

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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 Corinthians 8:4–6)

1. Isaac Newton and Socinianism

Isaac Newton was not a Socinian.¹ That is to say, he was not a communicant member of the Polish Brethren, nor did he explicitly embrace the Socinian Christology. What is more, Newton never expressly acknowledged any debt to Socinianism—characterised in his day as a heresy more dangerous than Arianism—and his only overt comment

¹ The first version of this paper was written in 1997 as an MPhil assignment in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. I am grateful to Peter Lipton and my supervisor Simon Schaffer for their invaluable help at that time, along with David Money, who kindly refined my Latin translations. A later version of the paper was presented in November 2000 as a lecture in the Department of Early Hungarian Literature at the University of Szeged in Hungary. I benefited greatly from the knowledge and expertise of the scholars of the early modern Polish Brethren and Hungarian Unitarians associated with that department. I am particularly grateful to my host, József Barna, who translated the entire paper, word for word, into Hungarian. It was also a special pleasure to discuss things Socinian and Unitarian with Sándor Kovács and Lehel Molnar, two young ministers in the Hungarian Unitarian Church from Cluj/Kolozsvár, Romania. The much smaller 1997 draft was published as Snobelen 2003, Newton. In revising and expanding this paper, which represents my current views, I am indebted to József Barna, Michael Hunter, Scott Mandelbrote, John Marshall and the participants at the Munich Conference. For permission to cite manuscript material in their archives, acknowledgements are due to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, the Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva, the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, the Provost and Fellows of King’s College, Cambridge and Uppsala Universitetsbiblioteket, Sweden. Quotations from Newton’s unpublished papers enclose insertions in angle brackets and represent deletions as strike-outs. An increasing number of Newton theological manuscripts can be viewed online at: www.newtonproject.ic.ac.uk.

on this movement is negative. Nevertheless, both Newton’s theology and religious life reveal a host of parallels with Socinianism. In this preliminary study, I demonstrate that Socinian analogies can be found in Newton’s theology, historiography, textual criticism, biblical hermeneutics and even his natural philosophy. Nor are the parallels limited to areas of his thought, for Newton also adopted social strategies commonly employed by seventeenth-century Socinians. Additionally, Newton contemplated publishing an antitrinitarian work and met with at least one known communicant Socinian. Although the precise sources and motivations of the parallels are more difficult to assess, an appreciation of Newton’s alignment with several features of Socinianism is crucial to making sense of a number of his pursuits—and this includes his intentions for the General Scholium to the *Principia mathematica*, one of the classic texts of the Scientific Revolution.

This paper begins with a brief introduction to the Socinians, along with a discussion of the difficulty of defining the term “Socinian” in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. I then move on to assess the consonance of Newton’s theology with that of Socinianism. To do this, a thorough investigation of various sorts of evidence is needed. First, I demonstrate Newton’s apparent openness to Socinianism by outlining his contacts with individuals associated with Socinianism, examining tolerant comments on Christologies compatible with Socinianism and analysing the contents of his library. This exercise will establish the plausibility of a sustained engagement with Socinianism. I then turn to a survey of Newton’s writings to reveal a host of analogies with the thought of this heretical movement. In addition to significant doctrinal parallels, I show that Newton shared a reformist doctrinal agenda with Socinians and that both his philosophy of history and his eschatology reflect this. Finally, I conclude that Newton—an eclectic thinker—utilised tools in his theological and intellectual apparatus that are either Socinian in nature or so close to Socinian that there is little appreciable difference.

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2 While tentative conclusions can be made now about the content of Newton’s private theological papers, more definitive studies will have to await further advances in the textual work of the Newton Project.

3 Two papers deriving in part from the original form of this paper, and which deal with aspects of Newton’s engagement with Socinianism, have now been published. See Snobelen 1999, *Newton*, and Snobelen 2001, *God*. 