

The following are extracts from the life of Isaac Newton broadcast by PBS:

Newton's Dark Secrets

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See: www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/newton/

NARRATOR: Newton's alchemy came as a surprise when it was discovered in the papers bought by the economist John Maynard Keynes in 1936. But other manuscripts now housed in Jerusalem contained an even greater surprise.

For most of his life, Newton held a dangerous secret. As a fellow at Trinity College, he was required to become a minister in the Church of England, but this was something he violently opposed.

Newton became convinced that the central doctrine of Christianity, the Trinity, or the idea that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were all equally divine, was not true. The more ancient Christian texts he read, the more he believed Christ was the son of God but not God's equal.

SIMON SCHAFFER: Now, because Newton was so convinced that God is extremely powerful and unique, Newton, as the saying goes, "reads himself into heresy." In other words, Newton begins to minimize, to play down, eventually to deny the divinity of Christ.

GALE CHRISTIANSON: And Newton comes to the conclusion, very early on, that the Trinity is a blasphemy on the First Commandment, because the First Commandment says that "thou shall have no other God before me." And the worship of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, from Newton's point of view, is a heresy.

NARRATOR: But denying the Trinity was illegal, and Newton was risking everything by holding these beliefs.

STEPHEN SNOBELEN: If Newton had been exposed, while he was at Cambridge, as an anti-Trinitarian, his career would have been over. He would have been ostracized. It's almost certain that it wouldn't have involved being put to death, but definitely prison would have been one possibility.

NARRATOR: Newton was eventually excused from becoming a minister. But he wrote more about theology and alchemy than science and math combined.

Only recently made available to the public, at the National Library in Jerusalem, these documents are now revealing that for Newton, religion and science were inseparable, two parts of the same life-long quest to understand the universe.

SIMON SCHAFFER: Newton himself wanted to design a universe in which God was absolutely present and absolutely powerful. There's an enormous irony there. In the 18th century, gangs of interpreters, most of them French, will take the God out of Newton's world. It's a very common image of what the Newtonian world was, that it was soulless, that it was mechanical, that it really wasn't theologically motivated at all.

GALE CHRISTIANSON: Now, ironically, that's very anti-Newtonian, because Newton argued that God had to be present, you couldn't read him out of the universe.

SIR ISAAC NEWTON (Dramatization): The most beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being.

NARRATOR: Newton owned more than 30 Bibles, and he examined them as rigorously as he did the natural world. Correlating Biblical passages with astronomical information, he re-dated ancient history, drawing up elaborate charts and chronologies that show civilization starting around 980 B.C.

JED BUCHWALD: I have hundreds and hundreds of pages of computations and workings and re-workings where he tries to probe this over a period of close to 30 years. Time and time again, he'll come back to it, calculating and recalculating, trying to make it work, just the way he tried to make his theories of light work.

NARRATOR: With the same fervor that he brought to science and math, Newton also combed the Bible for keys to the future.

STEPHEN SNOBELEN: What he was trying to do is determine when the end would come, when Christ would return, when all the apocalyptic events of the end times would, would come to a head.

NARRATOR: And that date is now alarmingly close: the year 2060.

JAMES FORCE: Newton is not a man who keeps his theology in a box that he brings out only on Sundays, and then a man who does his science as a working man the rest of the week. Newton sees his work as a seamless unity, and his project is to understand the truth of God.

PAMELA SMITH: Most people today think of religion and science as completely different spheres. In Newton's day, science, the investigation of the natural world, was a part of religion. It was...all questions, in some ways, ended in divine knowledge.