Sample Prospectus

MMW 14, 15, and 122

A Few Words of Caution about this Model:

You should treat this sample as a sufficiently reliable model for the structure of your prospectus, but you should also be aware that it is not the only possible model. Given the logic of your particular problem, you might be able to vary the structure somewhat, e.g., by changing the order in which arguments and counterarguments are presented. Nevertheless, while some flexibility may well be appropriate, you need to be absolutely certain to address carefully each of the required elements of the assignment set forth on the prompt. If you have questions about how to prepare the prospectus, consult your TA as soon as possible.

The marginalia notes in the model are for your reference only; they are designed to help you identify important elements of the assignment – they are the “parts” that the assignment absolutely requires. Do do not include them in the version of the prospectus that you submit to your TA.

This document is intended primarily as a model for the substance and organization of the prospectus. Be wary of copying the format of this document too slavishly; rather, you should follow the MMW Style Sheet and the MLA rules set forth in your writing manual. For example, the format for page numbering.

For a TA’s feedback on the actual argument made in this paper, please see the text following the Works Cited page.
Isaac Newton: The Forgotten Shepherd

At the summit of the Scientific Revolution stood the father of science: Isaac Newton. Newton bequeathed his major work to England between 1669 and 1718, advancing profound theories of astronomy, optics, mathematics, and physics (More xi, xii). Three centuries later, his work remains renowned for its exploration of natural phenomena. Excluded from this common historical portrayal, however, is Newton’s association with religion, specifically the way in which his work reacted to and had an impact on Christianity. Some argue that his work was heretical and promoted atheism, while others contend that it was inspired by and integrated Christianity. Confronted with this ambiguity, the question arises: What was the relation between Newton’s work and Christianity?

One plausible answer is that Newton’s work had insidious implications for Christianity, reflecting a negative relation. Richard Westfall elaborates that two entries in Newton’s notebooks—titled “De Trinitate” and “Idolatria”—express his doubt in the Trinitarian Order, and seem to suggest that exalting Christ (son) to the status of God (father), and assuming that he is an incarnation of the Lord, was idolatrous (qtd. in Westfall 312-314). Westfall continues that Newton’s “heretical convictions in a society of
pliant orthodoxy” likely contributed to his reclusive personality (318). It makes sense, then, that these heretical views were only publicized in 1733, years after his death (Keynes 26). In this respect, a degree of enmity characterizes the relation between Newton’s work and Christianity. Resembling a double edged sword—a relationship caustic for both sides—Newton’s conviction undermined a fundamental Christian belief and the prevalence of Christianity induced the seclusion of himself and his work.

Another plausible answer is that Newton’s work diverged from theological presuppositions. In this vein, John Henry argues that Newton’s work—which he lumps with that of other Scientific Revolutionary thinkers—promoted a reductionist perception of God that was essentially indistinguishable from atheism (351). More simply, Henry asserts that Newton’s work induced atheistic sentiments which undermined Christian principles.

There are, however, several weaknesses to these answers. First, Westfall explores a manuscript in which Newton writes that though Christ was not of congenital divinity, due to his sacrifice, he justifiably deserved the exaltation attributed to him in the Trinity. Westfall admits that Newton became a very firm believer in the Trinity and the Christian doctrine in general (317). Newton further implies a renewed belief in the Trinity when he writes that the Christians ought to learn from the Jews, who were being punished for their failure to recognize the Messiah (cited in Westfall 320). Holistically, there is more evidence, as provided by Westfall himself, supporting the notion that though Newton’s work expressed his doubts, it eventually reflected a vested belief in the Trinity. Second, Henry’s attack on the thinkers of the Scientific Revolution glosses over Newton’s belief...
that the order inherent in nature is a testament to the existence of a Creator (Strong 148).

It is reasonable to conclude that Newton had certain doubts regarding the Christian doctrine, but an absolute rejection of God was never expressed in his work. Ultimately, both answers are plausible but myopic in their understanding of Newton's work.

The more plausible answer—my thesis—is that Newton's work consistently integrated and was largely motivated by Christian beliefs. Newton explicitly expresses this notion in his letter to Revered Dr. Richard Bentley, in which he states: "I had an Eye upon such Principles as might work with considering Men, for the Belief of a Deity, and nothing can rejoice me more than to find is useful for that Purpose" (qtd. in Cohen 280).

What is imperative to recognize here is not simply Newton's words, but that the expression exists in the context of privacy. Newton has no incentive or reason to disguise his convictions, so it is extremely likely that what he expresses in the letter—religion as an inspiration and passion—is his authentic view.

Moreover, several historians, particularly B.J.T. Dobbs, assert that Newton’s successful scientific achievements were byproducts of religious goals (cited in Ben-Chaim 396). Ben-Chaim further expounds upon this point, arguing that Newton's work reflects the notion that the aim of science was to discover divine rules (397). Clearly, Newton’s faith comprised a productive motive for conducting research. The relation of his work with Christianity was thus a symbiotic one: Christianity evoked curiosity and inspiration within Newton’s work, which in turn sought to solidify Christianity’s validity.

J.E. McGuire notes that Newton’s discourse on natural philosophy indicates a fusion of scientific and religious vocabularies. It seems that Newton, evidently committed
in his belief in God, understood nature as a series of mathematical symbols written by God (McGuire 295). This comprised not only an incentive to engage in mathematical reasoning, but an inextricable bond between his work and religion. McGuire’s analysis reaffirms the idea that Christianity assumed a significant role in motivating Newton to compose work which supported scriptural principles. This topic is significant because it divulges the convictions and work of such a crucial and profound individual. My thesis is significant because it illuminates the productive and positive presence of faith in the life of a man widely regarded for his science. More broadly, it exemplifies that science and religion are not necessarily diametrically opposed; rather, the two can symbiotically coexist in the pursuit of truth.


TA Feedback to This Prospectus

Here are things that the TA asked the student to address in the final paper:

- The TA who graded this prospectus cautioned the student about the Research Question posed. Can Newton’s doubts and his Christian bent coexist? Is there a single relation between Newton’s work and Christianity? The TA advised the student to deal with this in the final paper.

- What does the student mean by a “negative relation” in the section describing Westfall’s scholarship? Can this be supported by evidence in scholarship, or is this a Level 4 issue (an answer that cannot be supported with evidence in scholarship)?

- The rebuttal seems to claim that because Newton did not outright reject a belief in God, any suggestion that his work relates to doubts is “myopic.” Why can’t personal doubts and his work coexist?

- The thesis relies on the idea that Newton wouldn’t lie to a Reverend in a letter. Is this a strong enough assumption to uphold the thesis? Is there evidence to support this? Why wouldn’t Newton lie to the Reverend?

The TA suggests that more evidence is needed to support thesis, claims, and counter-arguments.