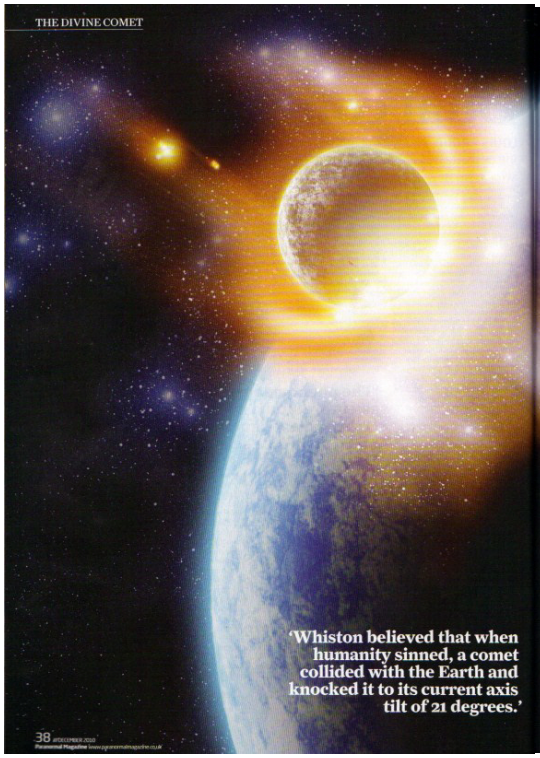


THE DIVINE COMET

The tension between scientific dogma and supernatural belief is as intense as ever. **ADRIAN CHAN-WYLES** recalls a man who tried to satisfy both camps, and ended up damned by both. Considered by Isaac Newton as his natural successor, William Whiston's career sadly crashed and burned - just like the cosmic force at the centre of his theory of creation.

'Whiston believed that when humanity sinned, a comet collided with the Earth and knocked it to its current axis tilt of 21 degrees.'

WHEN REALITY IS DEFINED, new ideas are formed and old beliefs are broken. It is a process of the refinement of thought that has continued for hundreds of years since the Renaissance.

The exact definition of 'reality' has changed as the method designed to establish it has evolved, been refined and clarified by consensus. From a strict academic perspective, 'reality' is very much the exercising of the collective mind, within the context of the subject being investigated.

Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727), Fellow of the Royal Society was elected Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University in 1669. He is renowned as probably the greatest influence in scientific development, and on scientific thought, the United Kingdom has ever produced.

What is not so well known, however, is that he wrote extensively on religious matters, much of which still remains unpublished and outside of the public domain to this day. Many find it even more surprising to learn that Newton found the subject of the 'occult' fascinating, and made extensive studies in this area.

The occult as a subject may be defined as the studying of the hidden or obscure forces of nature. That is, forces that although unseen, exercise an influence over physical matter on an extensive scale. This is generally viewed as unscientific, as these forces can not be known to exist if they can not be seen and therefore measured. It does raise the interesting question concerning 'gravity', a force that although generally 'unseen', is nevertheless generally accepted as existing.

The point here is that Newton utilised a broad range of the analysis of phenomena, and created an equally wide range of interpretation. The scientific community has by and large ignored, or even denied, the validity of these other influences upon his scientific work, as if his work on science occurred in a sterile vacuum, free of any outside polluting influences.

Considering his wide range of work, it is far more logical and reasonable to assume that Newton's entire subject of study eventually led him to his scientific conclusions, and that the occult may have had more of an influence on modern scientific thought than is generally believed. ●

ISAAC NEWTON: Arguably Britain's most influential scientist, Newton was also fascinated by the occult and wrote many theological works.

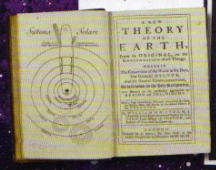
WILLIAM WHISTON: Regarded by Ignatius as equal to Epic genius, Whiston's ideas of cosmic forces working within Biblical doctrine found him ruled out from both the scientific community and the Church.

'Many find it surprising to learn that Sir Isaac Newton found the subject of the occult fascinating, and made extensive studies in this area.'

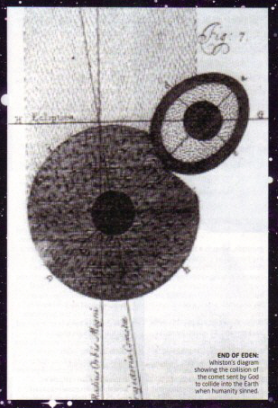
NEWTON'S SUCCESSOR

If Newton's occult interests are not well known, what is usually not known at all is that Newton designated an academic descendent in the person of William Whiston (1667-1752). Why is such an important event so little known today? If someone as important as Sir Isaac Newton, the father of modern physics, acknowledges a fellow academic as his equal in genius, why is it that Whiston remains obscure, and never officially associated with Newton? Whiston (like Newton) publicly supported the Arian Controversy. This unorthodox treatment received by Sir Isaac Newton. When he accepted the Lucasian Professorship, it was the tradition that all professors should be ordained Anglican priests. Newton applied to King Charles II to be exempted from this rule, on the grounds that he required all his time to study his academic subject, and therefore would have little or no time to preach. King Charles II agreed with Newton's request and exempted him from this rule. This prevented a conflict between Newton's Arian beliefs and those of the Protestant Church. However, the true root of William Whiston's problems probably do not begin with his religious beliefs, but because he chose to publish an extraordinary treatise entitled in its entirety as: *A New Theory of the Earth from its Original to the Consummation of all Things, Wherein the Creation of the World in Six Days, the Universal Deluge, and the General Conflagration, as laid down in the Holy Scriptures, are Shewn to be perfectly agreeable to Reason and Philosophy.* Whiston showed this work to Christian teaching is the denial of the validity of the Holy Trinity and the consubstantiality of Christ with God the Father. Whiston's support of this ideal led to him being dismissed from his professorship at Cambridge University. He was also tried twice for heresy. Although never formally convicted, the bad publicity virtually removed Whiston's work from serious academic consideration and made him appear to be of little value to the development of scientific theory. This is very different to the

HERETICAL: The title page of William Whiston's magnum opus, *A New Theory of the Earth*, which suggested our world was originally a comet and suffered cataclysm by further comets, perhaps God's displeasure.



COSMIC: Perhaps the most familiar comet for many of our readers is the Halley's comet. Its much larger-than-average but less made it clearly visible in the night sky during 1996 and 1997.



END OF EDEN: Whiston's diagram showing the collision of the comet sent by God to collide into the Earth when humanity sinned.

upsets the idyllic nature of existence prior to this point in the Earth's history. Whiston believed that the tails of comets contained water. As virtually nothing was known about comets at this time, their size and constituency, Whiston's ideas were not as strange then as they might appear now. For instance, the Great Flood of the Bible is described by Whiston as involving the Earth travelling through the tail of a travelling comet, and becoming deluged by a huge quantity of water as a result. It is important here to remember that both Newton and Whiston believed the universe to be static and unchanging most of the time. Whiston believed that comets could act as an agency for occasional change, on a universal level. His comet theory is very interesting, as it offers a 'natural' agency for change. The problem for Whiston

'It is reasonable to assume the occult may have had more of an influence on modern scientific thought than is generally believed.'

Newton, who gave it his general agreement. The work is an attempt to unite secular 'logic' with religious 'theology'. It was also an attempt to present the Genesis story as being logical if viewed from a certain perspective. Whiston argues that Moses describes not the creation of the universe, but rather only the creation of the Earth itself. Moses does not describe natural laws, but instead works from the context of how the creation process might appear to the eye of those who are as yet unaware of the natural laws.

GENESIS AND COSMOLOGY

Whiston views the proto-Earth as a comet containing a swirling atmosphere, defined as 'earth without form or void' in Genesis 1. This comet has an irregular orbit around the sun. God first establishes a circular and ordered orbit around the sun and this process allows the swirling atmosphere to settle and solidify into earth. As the opaque clouds settle, light appears with its corresponding darkness. The atmosphere further clears, and the sun and the moon become visible. The Earth's surface settles into concentric layers, with a solid centre, a watery second layer, and finally a frothy outer layer that serves as the ground. When humanity sins, a comet collides with the Earth, and knocks it to its current axis tilt of 21 degrees. This also

however, is that he used scientific thinking to justify Judeo-Christian theology. Science as a whole has moved away from the acknowledgement of theology as a valid means to describe the process of world formation. It is generally accepted today that it is nature's law, and not God's law that creates change. Whiston's work, regardless of its garb, does allow for an acknowledgement of change existing in the universe: a process, for instance, that Charles Darwin utilised in the formulation of his theory of Evolution. Whiston was not being irrational in the 1600s by assuming that theology was correct. It had been the ●

ORTHODOX: This 17th century painting by Flemmings shows a rather gone gentle view of God the Father creating the Earth, as would have suited the established view of the time.

dominating idea for over a thousand years. Science was new in Whiston's day. It was in its infancy, and the Renaissance was in many ways a rediscovery in Western Europe of the ancient Greek method of secular, philosophical enquiry. King Charles II assisted this process of bringing about Enlightenment in England, by founding the Royal Institute. But the process was resisted by the Church in general, because it weakened the Church both politically and morally. Whiston's work on the New Theory attempted a reconciliation of theology and science at a time when the clear separation between the two forms of interpretation of phenomena, had yet to be fully realised. The scientific community could not accept any notion of theology on practical grounds, as such a notion served to prevent the exercising and development of free-thought. Newton managed to continue his own occult and religious work, but did not allow it to dominate his scientific work, even if the two overlapped on occasion. What Newton kept firmly in the background, Whiston brought straight to the attention of all and sundry. And despite his friendly approach to religion, he was still tried for heresy. He upset the perception of scientific truth by appealing to religion, and upset theological truth by appealing to science.

THE UPSETTING OF REALITY

In the early days of modern science the battle for what would be considered 'real' was still very much open to interpretation. The search for reality, was of course, very much the search for truth itself. Objective knowledge of a reliable nature became the central theme of scientific endeavour, and defined the scientific method itself. Knowledge was to be free of any outside considerations. To be objective, it had to be perceived as 'pure'. A fact should stand alone and be true to its own premise, regardless of the belief system (or absence thereof) of those making and recording the observation. The independent nature of a fact ensured it was not coloured in anyway by a competing belief system of religion that sought to imbue objective, independent facts with a divine significance. The reason for this is that such a potential bias removes the requirement for a fact to be independent. Religious systems make the claim of 'total' and 'complete' knowledge: there is no need to think when it is believed that all the questions of humanity have been resolved within religious dogma. The premise of modern science came to assume the exact opposite. A fact was only a fact, when subjected to an agreed objective criterion of investigation, and then universally agreed to be a fact. Religious belief as a preconceived idea was effectively removed from the process of establishing reality. William Whiston's ideas of comets causing change on Earth have developed over the years. When viewed free of its religious dressing, the idea of comet collision has now become accepted as the possible cause of mass extinction at various times in the Earth's history. It has even been suggested that a comet may have exploded in the air above Tunguska (Siberia) in June 1908, causing widespread devastation over a 20 mile area. Whiston had a good idea, one that has become more credible as time has gone on. The idea that comets as examples of travelling, inter-planetary objects could in theory strike the Earth and cause catastrophic change has become something of an established theory to explain various extinction events. It was unfortunate for Whiston that he chose to present his intellectual work in a religious garb at a time when science was beginning to define itself in a clearly secular methodology.

ENIGMA: Trees were flattened over a 20 mile area in Tunguska, Siberia, in 1908. The event remains a mystery but the possibility that it was caused by an exploding comet is a popular theory.

'The Great Flood of the Bible is described by Whiston as involving the Earth travelling through the tail of a comet, and becoming deluged by a huge quantity of water as a result'

BIG DENT: Dramatic evidence that large bodies from space have indeed collided with the Earth is presented by the 4,000ft (1,206m) wide, 570ft (340m) deep Meteor Crater in Arizona.

Left

DELUGE: Whiston believed the Biblical flood was caused the Earth passing through the watery tail of a comet. Today it is thought that many comets many in fact be composed of compacted ice.

The battle was viewed as that of between two competing definitions of reality. It may be considered ironic today that some 300 years after the lifetime of Whiston, many modern scientists choose to present their scientific ideas in books with distinctly religious names. The scientific content is, of course, free from any religious allusions, but it is clear that privately many of these scientists subscribe to one religious faith or another. The difference between them and Whiston is that Whiston apparently failed to perceive the dynamic forces that were beginning to turn away from faith-based opinions. Or perhaps he did indeed see clearly what was happening, and thought that he could influence or change the direction science was taking through his stance of interpreting natural phenomena through a theological filter. Whatever Whiston's motivations, we can be sure he suffered academic isolation for them, after a very promising start at Cambridge University. It is remarkable that Newton thought so highly of Whiston, but his peers did not. As the majority of Newton's religious work remains unpublished, it is difficult to gauge just how similar his viewpoints in this area could be, when compared with Whiston's work. It is interesting to speculate just why Newton's religious work and his occult interest are not as well-known as his secular, scientific theories. Of course, while Whiston decided to publish his religious inspired work, Newton did not. But it may be seen as significant that the Establishment has not been in a hurry to do so either. ●

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