

Isaac Newton: scientist, theologian

by Susana Schulz

Isaac Newton (1642-1727), one of history's foremost scientists was also a noted theologian.

As a teenager, Isaac Newton, dropped out of school and was not sure what he should do. His mother wanted him to become a farmer. But Henry Stokes—master at the King's School in Grantham (England)—persuaded Isaac's mother to send him back to school so that he might complete his education. He did, but every day he had to face a schoolyard bully, and he couldn't stand his torture. There was only way he could beat this bully, and that was to outsmart him in his studies. Eventually Newton became the top-ranked student in the class.

This teenage dropout excelled in everything he did, particularly in mathematics and science. Before long, he established his name in the world of science for three fundamental discoveries: the method of calculus (which is the basis for much of modern mathematics); the spectral composition of light (and some other fundamentals of optics); and the law of universal gravitation (a fundamental law for the field of physics). All this he accomplished by the time he was 23 years old. When asked how he achieved so much, he replied: "*Nocte dieque incubando*" ("By thinking about it night and day").

Besides being a physicist, mathematician, astronomer, natural philosopher, inventor, and alchemist, Newton also was a respected theologian of his times. Even though he became a world-renowned scientist, particularly for his law of gravity, his legacy left more writings on theology than on science. Once he testified: "I have a fundamental belief in the Bible as the Word of God, written by those who were inspired. I study the Bible daily."

Newton added a new dimension to the study of science and set it in a unique worldview. "Gravity," he believed, "explains the motions of the planets, but it cannot explain who set the planets in motion. God governs all things and knows all that is or can be done."

He further added: "This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent Being... This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all; and on account of his dominion He is wont to be called 'Lord God' or 'Universal Ruler'... The Supreme God is a Being eternal, infinite, [and] absolutely perfect."

Of the many sayings attributed to Newton, one of my favorite is this: "Opposition to godliness is atheism in profession, and idolatry in practice."

