

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 32 (NS) Winter 2008

© 2008 Contributor all rights reserved

<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Coleridge, Gladstone and the Irish Catholics

Stuart Andrews

TWO EVENTS in 1801 turned Coleridge's thoughts towards a defence of the Established Church, and would eventually lead to his writing *On the Constitution of the Church and State*. On 1 January 1801, the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland became effective, and in July, Napoleon concluded his Concordat with the Papacy, recognizing Catholicism as 'the religion of the majority of the French', and requiring bishops to appoint their clergy 'with the agreement of the government'.¹ In the summer of 1802 he wrote to his brother George that the French Concordat had first made him 'think accurately and with consecutive logic on the force and meaning of the word *Established Church*'. Whereas the Anglican Church was a true establishment, the new French Church was 'a House of Convenience built on the sands of a transient Legislature'. Coleridge explains that in changing his mind 'respecting the *establishment* of the Church of England, I did not mean in any way to refer to its peculiar Doctrine—or to the Church of England in particular' (CL II 803, 805–7). By contrast the Act of Union declared that 'the established Church of England and Ireland shall be deemed and taken as an essential part of the Union'.²

Just as the growing ambition of Napoleon dampened Coleridge's youthful championship of the ideals of 1789, so his identification with Irish resistance to English oppression in the 1790s gave way to concern at the consequences of bringing within the pale of the United Kingdom four million Irish Catholics—rising to almost six million in a UK population of 24 million by the time Coleridge published *Church and State*. In the *Watchman* for 9 March 1796, two years before Irish Catholics and Presbyterians united in rebellion against the Anglican Ascendancy that ruled Ireland, Coleridge had reprinted Henry Grattan's House of Commons speech on Yeomanry outrages, as reported in the *Morning Chronicle*. Grattan had characterized the government's policy as 'a persecution conceived in the bitterness of bigotry, carried on with the most ferocious barbarity by a banditti, who being full of the religion of the State, had committed with the greatest audacity and confidence the most horrid murders, and had proceeded from robbery and massacre to extermination' (W 75).

That report echoes the tone of Coleridge's 'War Eclogue' ('Fire, Famine and Slaughter'), started in the year of Grattan's speech and published in 1797. In the *Watchman* for 17 March 1796, Coleridge printed a summary of the *Bill for more effectually suppressing insurrections in Ireland*, which imposed the death penalty on anyone administering an illegal oath. He concedes that the ignorance, starvation and degradation of the Irish people make some coercion necessary. Yet (he argues) 'it is not laws of coercion but the laws of amelioration that will be efficacious' (W 117–118). Writing to Sir George and Lady Beaumont in October

¹ E. E. Y. Hales, *Revolution and Papacy 1769–1846* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960) 145.

² W. C. Costin and J. C. Watson, *The Law and Working of the Constitution 1660–1914* 2 vols (Black, 1952) II 20–8.

1803, Coleridge confesses himself ‘extremely affected’ by the fate of the 24-year-old Irish rebel, Robert Emmet, whom he likened to his own ‘very young, very enthusiastic’ former self. Distinguished by ‘Talents & accomplishments & a sort of turbid eloquence,’ Coleridge recalls, ‘like him, I was a zealous Partisan of Christianity, a Despiser & Abhorrer of French Philosophy & French Morals’. Recognizing that the vices of the Irish rebels were ‘so palpably the effect of darkest Ignorance and foulest oppression,’ Coleridge decides that, instead of executing ‘this most mistaken and bewildered young Man’, the government should have ‘taken his Oath and word of honour, to have remained in America or some of our colonies for the next ten years of his Life’ (CL II 999, 1002–3).

Ireland does not figure often in the *Friend*, which first appeared between June 1809 and March 1810. Perhaps reflecting his Malta experience of Catholicism, there are dismissive references to the ‘interdictory Catalogues of the Roman Hierarchy’, and to ‘counterfeit frankincense which smoke-blacks the favourite idol of a catholic village’ (F II 59, 285). But, recalling the Gordon Riots, Coleridge writes of ‘those bloody statutes against the Papists, the abolition of which gave rise to the infamous Riots in 1780’. And he castigates the Antijacobins—‘those mistaken Men’ who had confused Irish restiveness with the ‘dire murmuring and strange consternation which precedes the storm or earthquake of national Discord’ (F II 136, 143).

After the end of the *Friend* in 1810, Coleridge began writing regularly for the now pro-government *Courier*, which Cobbett’s *Political Register* pungently accused of serving ‘all the old blood-sucking Anti-Jacobin crew’ (PR XXX 226). In March 1811 Coleridge might write gushingly to Godwin, thanking him for an invitation to meet Grattan: ‘To sit at the same table with GRATTAN—who would not think it an Honour, a red letter day in the Almanack of his Life?’ (CL III 312). But in May, writing for the *Courier*, Coleridge was more circumspect: ‘It is with peculiar reluctance that we ever turn to the state of Ireland, from the difficulty of treating the subject without reference to the errors on both sides the water, which, if our earnest wishes would avail, should be buried in eternal oblivion.’ Coleridge did not lose his sympathy for the sufferings of the Catholic Irish, but his target in May 1811 was Dublin’s reactivated Catholic Committee, which had held a celebratory dinner to mark the presentation of a petition to the Westminster Parliament. ‘The Dublin press had seen the occasion as ‘well calculated to pour balm into the wounds of an afflicted Country, to file down the asperities which distract her, and to harmonize her contending elements’ (EOT II 147).

Coleridge was less sanguine. He supported the government proclamation prohibiting the 42-member Catholic Committee from holding elections for serving delegates. He argued that it was unnecessary for Irish Catholics to ‘form themselves into a Catholic Parliament, with Delegates from each County or City in the Kingdom, as if to intimidate and menace the Legislature’ (EOT II 242). That tactic had succeeded in 1782, when the Irish Volunteers (still carrying arms issued for defence against invasion in the American War) had overawed the then Dublin Parliament and had extracted the semblance of independence from London. But

the Act of Union had changed all that. In 1808 Grattan, the hero of 1782, had proposed in the Westminster Parliament that a petition from Irish Catholics should be referred to a Committee of the Whole House. By 1812, the *Antijacobin Review and True Churchman* (as it was now called) complained: 'Do not petitions pour in upon us, from the Papists of England and Ireland, modestly calling for the abolition of *all* tests and distinctions in matters of religion? Have not some degenerate Protestants been mad or foolish enough to make a similar call upon the legislature?' (AJR XLI 358). And both Coleridge and the *Antijacobin Review* quoted Daniel O'Connell's speeches to prove that Catholic Emancipation was what Coleridge called 'the stepping-stone to separation as the engine to a repeal of the Union' (EOT II 243 and AJR XLI 31).

Coleridge insists that Catholics are not excluded from Parliament because of their theology but because of their allegiance to the Pope—a foreign spiritual authority 'that intermixes itself with almost every point that most nearly affects the temporal interests and conduct of their subjects'. He urges resistance to the claims of the Catholic Committee because petitioning is 'not the real object; because they would controul and not petition, because they would intimidate the Legislature; because they want to raise the spirit of 1782'. His Majesty's subjects could not be allowed to invoke the right of petition, accorded them by the Constitution, in order to overthrow the Constitution: 'We cannot suffer them to cloak rebellion under the garb of petition. We cannot look on with apathy and indifference whilst they are sending forth their manifestos for a revolution' (EOT II 255). In spite of Coleridge's fulminations in the *Courier* that summer—he stopped writing regularly for the paper in September 1811—Canning's motion in June 1812, calling for the investigation of Catholic claims, easily passed the House of Commons and was only narrowly defeated in the Lords. But Grattan's attempted Catholic Relief Bill of the following year failed, and in May 1816 the *British Critic* congratulated itself that 'the great question of CATHOLIC EMANCIPATION, which has now for so many years agitated and divided the British nation, is no longer a rallying point of political animosity or a watchword of contending factions' (BC ns V 515–16).

In 1816, more than a decade had still to elapse before publication of Coleridge's *Constitution of the Church and State*. In 1825, the year when he published *Aids to Reflection*, and a year after the *British Critic* reviewed Southey's anti-Catholic *Book of the Church* (BC XXI 449–63), Coleridge wrote to the publishers listing six works he had ready for the press, including *On the Church—and the true Character of the Romish Church* (CL V 434–5). By the time *On the Constitution of the Church and State according to the Idea of Each* appeared in December 1829, Catholic Emancipation had passed into law. Coleridge had been writing while the Act was still only a Bill, and before its detailed provisions were known. In March 1829, he told Henry Nelson Coleridge that he had only half-a-dozen pages to write before finishing the work, but that 'such has been the condition of my mind & body that I have only wasted an extravagant quantity of paper, writing and rewriting & nothing to my mind' (CL VI 587–8). Coleridge's title-page with its reference to the appended 'Aids towards a Right Judgment on the late Catholic Bill', shows that the context

of the work was the Emancipation debate—brought so suddenly to a close by the reluctant determination of Wellington and Peel to force the measure through Parliament.

Though shaped by the three-decade rearguard action by opponents of Emancipation, Coleridge's *Church and State* approaches church-state relations on the basis of general principles. He tells us that his first impulse had been to suppress the pages which he had written 'when the particulars of the Bill were yet unknown'. They were written, he explains, to record 'the nature and grounds of my apprehension that the measure would fail to effect the object immediately intended by the authors'. But the Bill, he now admits, had 'agreeably disappointed my fears' (C&S 11). In the same opening chapter, Coleridge challenges the prediction by Peel that the Emancipation Act would 'break in upon the constitutional settlement of 1688'. He counters Peel's claim by recalling that in 1689 many members of Parliament regarded the new constitution of 1688 as itself 'breaking in on the English Constitution'. Coleridge, rather characteristically, contrasts the constitution as reality and as idea: the constitution 'does not the less exist in *reality*, because it both *is*, and *exists as*, an IDEA.' (C&S 19)

Coleridge describes his aim as 'to present the *idea* of a National Church, not the history of *the* Church established in this Nation'. His earlier concern with Catholicism as an *imperium in imperio*, re-phrased by Stuart as 'a government within a government' (EOT II clx and C&S 149) is restated here, though in more general terms. While admitting that there may be various factors leading us to question 'the comparative fitness of individuals or of particular classes' to enjoy the full privileges of nationhood, there were only two *absolute* Disqualifications'. The first was: 'Allegiance to a Foreign Power, or the Acknowledgement of any other visible HEAD OF THE CHURCH, but our Sovereign Lord the King.' And the second disqualification (more surprisingly) was 'compulsory celibacy in connection with, and in dependence on, a foreign and extra-national head' (C&S 81). In Coleridge's eyes, the Established Church and the State are 'two poles of the same magnet', and the magnet is 'the CONSTITUTION of the nation' (C&S 30).

The National Church is, however, distinct from the Christian Church ('the Church of Christ'), which is not a 'kingdom, realm or state of the world', nor is it 'an Estate of any such realm, kingdom or state'. The Christian Church is rather 'the appointed Opposite to them all *collectively*—the *sustaining, correcting, befriending* Opposite of the World! The compensating counterforce to the interest and inevitable evils and defects of the STATE'. In return for its social contribution to the well-being of the state, 'the Christian Church asks of the state neither wages nor dignities. She asks only *to be let alone*'. She is justified in that request so long as 'there is nothing in her constitution, nor in her discipline, inconsistent with the interests of the State, nothing resistant or impedimental to the State in its exercise of its rightful powers in the fulfilment of its appropriate duties, or in the effectuation of its legitimate objects'. The formula 'church and state' has meaning for Coleridge only in reference to the National Church: 'The Church of Christ cannot be placed in this conjunction and antithesis without forfeiting the very

name of Christian. The true and only counter-position to the Christian Church is to the world'. Her one 'paramount aim and object, indeed, is *another* world, not a world to come exclusively, but likewise *another world than now is*'. It follows that a mark of the Church of Christ is 'namely the absence of any visible head or sovereign', and the preclusion of 'any local or personal center of unity, or any single source of universal power' (C&S 114–18).

That last stipulation is a veiled reference to the Roman Catholic Church. As he comes to describe the kind of Emancipation Act he would like to see, Coleridge emphasizes that his concern is not with rival theologies. The 'grounding and directing principle' of any such Act 'must be one, on which a Catholic might consistently vindicate and recommend the measure to Catholics. It must therefore be independent of all differences purely theological'. Coleridge favours the admission of Catholic layman not only to Parliament, but 'to all other offices below the Crown, without any exception'. But the clergy are a different case: 'At no time and under no circumstances has it ever been, nor can it ever be, compatible with the spirit or consistent with the safety of the British Constitution, to recognize the Roman Catholic Priesthood, as now constituted, a component estate of the realm'. The preamble to the Act should therefore explicitly exclude 'the Romish Priesthood (comprehending all under oaths of canonical obedience to the Pope as their ecclesiastical sovereign)' from the perquisites of the National Church, while specifically stating that the exclusion was unrelated to 'any doctrines received and taught by the Romish Church as Articles of Faith, and protested against as such by the Churches of the Reformation'. Emancipation should be based on some pre-Reformation principle such as Magna Carta (C&S 156).

Coleridge succinctly states the contradictory situation created by the Act of Union: 'Three-fourths of His Majesty's Irish Subjects are Roman Catholics, with a papal priesthood, while three-fourths of the sum total of His Majesty's subjects are Protestants'. This contradiction 'with its causes and consequences' was not removable 'by any immediate or direct means' (C&S 150). The test of Emancipation must therefore be whether it is likely to improve matters or make them worse. 'Will the measure tend to produce tranquility?' Coleridge asks. He concludes that it will, if coupled with removal of all existing disabilities. The law should ignore Roman Catholics 'under any other name than that of British subjects' (C&S 157).

Forty years after Coleridge's death, Gladstone's first ministry would be the seventh nineteenth-century administration to lose office over the Irish question—and that excludes Pitt's resignation in 1801, ostensibly over George III's opposition to Emancipation. By the 1870s it would be all too clear that Emancipation had not brought tranquility to Ireland. But in 1838, a mere four years after Coleridge died, the 29-year-old Gladstone published his own treatise on Church and State. On the first page of the first chapter of *The State in its relations with the Church*, Gladstone declares: 'The Romanist (with some exceptions), in order to erect his own structure of faith and discipline, now

seems to aim first at the demolition of any other, and to deem us so involved in fatal error, that we must pass through the zero of national infidelity in order to arrive at the truth.’³ By page 10, he pays tribute to Coleridge, though the compliment is somewhat qualified: ‘Coleridge has dealt admirably with the question in his “Idea of Church and State”’; but his conception demands from his readers a greater share of the power and habits of abstraction than we can expect to find beyond the limits of a very small class’ (Gladstone I 10). Gladstone nevertheless describes Coleridge’s work as ‘alike beautiful and profound’ and summarizes his concept of a ‘clerisy’. He also quotes Coleridge on the ‘sustaining, correcting, befriending’ role of the Christian Church (Gladstone I 26).

Gladstone’s standpoint on the English Reformation, which he sees as rejecting ‘not the communion but the jurisdiction of Rome’, is close to Coleridge’s contention that the excluded status of the Catholic clergy is due to their recognition of papal authority and not to their theological doctrines (Gladstone II 167). Challenging Warburton⁴ rather than Coleridge, Gladstone questions the view that the Established Church rests its claim merely on its having the largest number of adherents: ‘The adoption of a national church is then with it a matter of calculation and not of conscience’. Gladstone complains that, by restricting the state absolutely to temporal and national ends, it ‘is consequently stripped of all its nobler attributes’ (Gladstone I 18–19). Warburton, writing a century earlier, had argued somewhat pragmatically that the state needs the established church to reinforce the inadequate sanctions of civil society (Warburton IV 32–3). Gladstone asserts, rather more elusively: ‘The legislative mind of the nation must be ethically instructed; which implies that it must be enlightened by religion, on the basis of which alone it is that moral science can be effectually reared.’ Religion, Gladstone claims, is ‘directly necessary to the right employment of the energies of the State as State’. The Church is thus the moral conscience of the State (Gladstone, I 88, 93). And Gladstone is willing to recognize the Anglican Church ‘on principles of reason, as offering in her oneness and permanency of communion, the only adequate guarantee of the unity which is important to the State’ (Gladstone II 189).

The young Gladstone in 1838 dismissed any suggestion of disestablishment: ‘Nothing can be more impractical, nothing more visionary’. But he did concede that ‘if religion be injured by a national establishment of the Church, it must forthwith and at whatever hazard be disestablished’ (Gladstone II 145, 272). Three decades later, early in his first ministry, Gladstone would disestablish the Irish Church—the Irish part of that Church of England and Ireland, which the 1800 Act had hailed as ‘an essential part of the Union’. Coleridge had admitted in 1818 to William Mudford: ‘I try and try—keep my

³ Gladstone, *The State in its relations with the Church* 2 vols (London: Murray, 1838; 4th edn 1841) I 1

⁴ W. Warburton, *The Alliance between Church and State or the necessity and equity of an Established Religion, and a Test Law, demonstrated* (1736) in *The Works of the Right Reverend William Warburton, Lord Bishop of Gloucester* 7 vols (1788) IV.

mind religiously open to every argument from the partisans of the (so miscalled) Catholic Emancipation—but still my convictions remain the same. I believe in my Conscience that the separation of Ireland from this country would be a less ultimate Evil’ (CL IV 896). Coleridge’s fears that Emancipation might not bring peace to Ireland were to be fulfilled. Critics saw Gladstone’s 1869 act of disestablishment as a panic response to the Fenian terror campaign, which in 1867 had targeted Clerkenwell prison, blowing a hole in the wall but doing more damage to surrounding houses and residents than to the jail itself. Disestablishment was an irrelevant issue to the Fenians, but it made a huge breach in the Act of Union. As *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* pointedly put it: ‘If the Fenians did not explode a prison, they blew up a Church’ (BEM CVI 560–2). Neither Emancipation nor Disestablishment would pacify Catholic Ireland, as we know to our cost.⁵

⁵ For the debate on Catholic Emancipation in the periodical press see Stuart Andrews, *Irish Rebellion: Protestant polemic 1798-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006) chapters 6 and 7.