Religion, Reason and Literary Form: Sara Coleridge's *Dialogues on Regeneration*

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SARA COLERIDGE WAS A RELIGIOUS WRITER of striking literary and intellectual originality.[1] In times of deep politico-religious discord, she addressed the philosophical and theological grounds of sectarian division. Her religious writings reflect an intense commitment to the public sphere during the final decade of her life. Like Milton in his religious pamphlets, Sara Coleridge the religious author was, in effect, exercising 'the gift of lay ministry', and flouting thereby the gender conventions of mid-Victorian authorship.[2] From the early 1830s to the early 1850s, religious controversy was waged with acrimonious aggression: those of differing persuasions engaged in heated polemical 'warfare' and scurrilous mutual condemnation.[3] As Sara Coleridge's correspondent, the future Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice put it in 1843, 'fierce denunciation' had become the dominant mode of public religious discourse, and the desire 'to prove other people profane' had displaced 'a reverence for what is sacred'. Religious sectarianism had consequently 'spread' a 'spirit of gossiping and slander […] throughout society'.[4] Sara Coleridge's career as a religious author is defined by her responses to this fractured national culture.

Sara Coleridge's progress, from 'On Rationalism' (1843) to *Dialogues on Regeneration* (1850–51), reveals a remarkable development, at once religious and literary. Her premature death from cancer in May 1852 prevented her from finalizing and publishing the *Dialogues on Regeneration*, so that this major work has remained in manuscript, unread and, until recently, unknown. *Dialogues on Regeneration* is Sara Coleridge's equivalent of her father's *Opus Maximum*. Fortunately, the manuscript, which consists of just under 700 pages, has survived, preserved in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Much of the work was ready or almost ready for publication at the time of Sara Coleridge's death.

Dialogues on Regeneration consists of four series of dialogues, preceded by an 'Introductory Dialogue'.[5] At the outset, two friends, Phosphilus Markright, a liberal Anglican religious philosopher influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Mystes Marvell, an Anglo-Catholic, discuss contemporary modes of preaching, and begin to explore current teachings on the doctrines of baptism and regeneration. In the 'Introductory Dialogue', Marvell proposes that he and Markright should continue their discussion and undertake an extended enquiry

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1 In this paper, I refer to Sara Coleridge as 'Coleridge' and to her father as 'STC'.

2 William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, revised by Gordon Campbell, 2nd edition, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 216.

3 'Extracts from a New Treatise on Regeneration', in *Aids to Reflection*, 6th edition, edited by Henry Nelson Coleridge, 2 vols (London: Pickering, 1848), II, p. 255. References hereafter in text: Extracts.

4 Frederick Denison Maurice, *On Right and Wrong Methods of Supporting Protestantism. A Letter to Lord Ashley, Respecting a Certain Proposal for Stifling the Expression of Opinion in the University of Oxford* (London: John W. Parker, 1843), pp. 13, 12, 13, 14.

5 *Dialogues on Regeneration* manuscripts, Harry Ransom Center. References hereafter in text: HRC.

into these contested doctrines. A series of fifteen dialogues follows the introduction, in the first of which, entitled 'Preliminaries', Markright and Marvell set the parameters of their enquiry, and clarify points of terminology. The five dialogues which follow the 'Preliminaries' develop a philosophical line of investigation. The remaining nine cover a range of approaches, drawing largely upon scriptural exegesis and theological enquiry. Had Sara Coleridge lived to finalize the work and bring it to publication, she might have restructured this opening sequence and sub-divided it into several shorter series, under discrete headings, following her practice in the rest of the work.

After the initial set of fifteen dialogues, the remaining series are arranged under the following titles: 'On the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ in Relation to Time', which contains five dialogues; 'Scriptural Dialogues', which has ten dialogues; and finally, 'On the Idea of Personality in reference to the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ' (cited hereafter as 'Dialogues on Personality'). This final series contains seven dialogues. In this essay, I seek to outline some key literary qualities of *Dialogues on Regeneration*, with reference to the dialogue tradition. At the outset, I will summarize briefly the politico-religious background of the *Dialogues on Regeneration*, because that context influences Sara Coleridge's conception and use of her literary form.

Historical Context: The Politico-Religious Crises of 1850

In *Dialogues on Regeneration*, Sara Coleridge addresses the theology of the religious crises of 1850. The grounds of mid-century religious division originated in the early 1830s, when politico-religious disputes had erupted between Church and State. In the wake of the Great Reform Act of 1832, a group of Oxford High Church, High Tory clergy had campaigned to resist intervention by the reformist Whig government in the affairs of the Church of England. The Oxford activists had disseminated their views through a series of *Tracts for the Times* (hence the epithet Tractarian), and had quickly gained widespread publicity, becoming a significant and influential presence in English culture. The Tractarians incorporated in their politico-religious agenda a radical Catholicizing revision of Anglican doctrine, reconstructing it according to the tenets and ordinances of the early Church. Invoking the doctrine of apostolic succession, the Tractarians elevated the role and status of the Church as an institution. This was a matter with which Sara Coleridge was particularly concerned: she regarded Tractarian insistence on clerical authority as an attack upon individual liberty of conscience. In an eloquent passage in 'On Rationalism', she had condemned Tractarian theology as a 'thought-stifling doctrine', whose exponents sought to prevent Christians from 'us[ing] the spiritual eyes which God has given us for the determination of our faith'.[6] She seeks to 'guard' from 'violation' an individual, 'spiritual faith' (Extracts 256).

Central to Tractarian theology was the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, which Edward Bouverie Pusey and John Henry Newman had appropriated

[6] Sara Coleridge, 'On Rationalism', in *Aids to Reflection*, 6th edition, edited by Henry Nelson Coleridge, 2 vols (London: Pickering, 1848), II, p. 238. References hereafter in text: OR 1848.

from the Church Fathers. According to this doctrine, a passive individual, whether adult or infant, receives the gift of a new spiritual nature in baptism. No active volitional engagement of the subject is required: the action of the priest in performing the ritual confers the new nature.[7] Tractarian theology sought to establish baptism as the primary instrument of spiritual regeneration, and thereby to negate the teachings of the Protestant Reformation, in which individual faith was the essential means of grace. Such theological innovations caused significant, continuing disruption in English religious culture. In *Dialogues on Regeneration*, Markright refers to 'the enterprise' undertaken by 'the Tract doctors and their successors' of 'unprotestantizing our Church'. He maintains that the Tractarians, in destabilizing the Church of England, have disrupted national religious identity as a whole: they have 'led numbers of young men to take an essentially wrong view of the spirit and principles of the teaching of their own church' (HRC).

Baptismal Regeneration was the locus of contention in the first politico-religious upheaval of 1850, the Gorham crisis, in which the judicial committee of the Privy Council ruled that an Evangelical Anglican clergyman was not required to teach that doctrine. As in the 1830s, an institution of a Whig government had intervened in the affairs of the Church; but not solely in administration and finance, as before. Now, the government had ruled upon doctrine. Of profound concern for Anglo-Catholics, the Privy Council's judgment had asserted the Protestant character of the English Church.[8] Among eminent Anglo-Catholics who consequently seceded to the Roman Catholic Church was Sara Coleridge's parish priest, William Dodsworth. John Henry Newman, arguably the most influential Tractarian, had converted to Roman Catholicism in October 1845. In 1850, as a Roman Catholic priest, he 'thought that the [Gorham] crisis could be turned to good account', and delivered a series of lectures designed to persuade Anglo-Catholics that their true home was the Roman Church.[9] Newman addressed unease about a national Church in thrall to 'the convenience and comfort of Downing Street'.[10] Sara Coleridge explains in her correspondence that she supported the Privy Council's judgment, maintaining that it upheld traditional Anglican toleration.

At the end of September 1850, religious tensions were exacerbated severely when Pope Pius IX established a new Roman Catholic hierarchy in England. Roman Catholic dioceses were to be established and the leading Catholic cleric in the country, Dr Nicholas Wiseman, was elevated to the Cardinalate. This initiative, known as the Papal Aggression, provoked widespread anti-Catholic agitation, in which Anglo-Catholics as well as Roman Catholics became targets,

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[7] This is a Roman Catholic doctrine defined by the Council of Trent: 'If any one shall say that by the […] sacraments grace is not conferred through the act performed, but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for obtaining grace, let him be anathema'.

[8] The last of the *Tracts for the Times* was published in 1841. As Markright explains to Marvell, the religious context had changed by 1850 so that the term 'Tractarian' was no longer applicable. Markright states his preference for the term 'Anglo-Romanist', though he also uses the more generally current 'Anglo-Catholic'.

[9] Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 350.

[10] John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Submitting to the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition (London: Burns and Lambert, 1850), p. 161.

especially when Whig Prime Minister Lord John Russell, in condemning the Pope's action, branded Anglo-Catholic ministry as even more dangerous than the Roman Aggression. Russell's ill-judged intervention increased the heat of anti-Catholic prejudice. The political dimension of the crisis is emphasized by Newman's lectures on English Catholicism in 1851, in which he countered the prevailing anti-Catholic hostility with 'an attack on John Bull', in which he describes England, 'as far as religion is concerned', as a 'workhouse', into which 'no gleam of light finds its way […] from without'.[11] Newman associates English anti-Catholicism with utilitarian socio-industrial policies.

In such tense times, Sara Coleridge maintained a principled distance from all parties in religion or politics. Consequently, there is some ambiguity of attitude in her religious writings. In 'On Rationalism', she deplores the allegedly oppressive and divisive aspects of Tractarianism, but draws attention to the piety and devotional commitment of its leading exponents. Furthermore, Sara Coleridge recognizes the presence of a 'dry [and] negative Protestantism' in English religion which is as inimical to the living practice of the Gospel as is an overbearing and logically flawed Catholicism.[12] She eschews the language of popular criticism of Tractarianism, in which Pusey, for example, is branded a 'Popish fanatic', and she rejects the use of pejorative labels which elicit stock responses.[13] As her protagonist Una observes, '[t]he name of Calvinism is like the Gorgon's head […] it freezes all opposition. That of Romanism may be used in the same way'.[14] Markright observes that polemicists often misrepresent the tendencies they oppose by means of such tags as 'rationalist, puritan', or 'Wesleyan, Puseyite', which are 'inaccurate' and 'maliciously ironical' (SRW 125). Sara Coleridge recognizes that a reform of language is required if national religious discourse is to become genuinely religious and practically productive, rather than confrontational and dishonest.

Literary Context: The Tradition and Theory of Dialogue

In 'Extracts from a New Treatise on Regeneration' (1848), Sara Coleridge states the ethical principles that should govern controversial religious writing. Religious debate, she maintains, should be 'carried on in perfect fairness, […] in charity and kindness' (Extracts, 255). An author should represent the views of opponents accurately and fairly, she maintains, using an opponent's own terminology. A religious tenet should not be presented in the pejorative language of someone who rejects it. Equally, in putting forward her own doctrine, an author should employ a plain and direct style, rather than obscuring its substance under cover of flamboyant and superficially impressive

[11] Ker, *Newman*, p. 364. John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1851), p. 43.

[12] Sara Coleridge, 'Introduction', *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, second edition prepared for publication in part by the late Henry Nelson Coleridge, completed and published by his widow, 2 vols (London; William Pickering), 1847, I, p. lxi. References hereafter in text: *Biographia 1847*.

[13] 'Professor Pusey and The Oxford Tracts on Baptism', *Christian Observer*, 36 (1836), 788–791, (p. 790).

[14] *Sara Coleridge and the Oxford Movement: Selected Religious Writings*, edited by Robin Schofield (London: Anthem Press, 2020), p. 117. Citations hereafter in text: SRW.

language. This ethic of stylistic restraint, influenced by Tractarian literary aesthetics, is integral to Sara Coleridge's religious convictions.

She holds that all Christians share a common experience of essential religious truth; that all assent to the same 'great objects of faith', regardless of intellectual disagreement on points of doctrine (*Biographia 1847*, lxxii). Sara Coleridge maintains that all may meet in a 'unity of faith',[15] and defines religious faith in experiential rather than conceptual terms: 'I mean by faith – the embracing of spiritual realties with the whole soul and spirit – the perception of them by the intelligent mind and reception of them into the heart'.[16] Because faith, for Sara Coleridge, is the 'reception' of 'spiritual realities […] into the heart', the 'life and soul and substance of Christianity may be pretty equally partaken by those who logically differ'. Equally, 'the whole logical truth' of Christianity 'is not the possession of any one party', she maintains: 'it exists in fragments amongst the several parties, and […] much of it is yet to be developed'. It is important, therefore, that the religious thinker should 'sift' with open-minded disinterest 'the theology of all parties'.[17] In doing so, she must be ready to recognize 'that [she herself] may be partly in the wrong'. The dialogue genre is well suited, therefore, to Sara Coleridge's task of critical 'sifting', of separating 'spiritual realities' from sectarian 'dogmatism' (SC to HCR, August or September 1846).

In her choice of dialogue as a medium for contentious topics, Sara Coleridge has notable predecessors in English philosophy and literature. In the mid 1590s, Edmund Spenser had addressed pressing political problems in his *View of the State of Ireland* (1633), a dialogue to which Sara Coleridge refers in some detail in her 'Introduction' to *Essays on his Own Times* (1850).[18] Sara Coleridge follows two eminent eighteenth-century philosophers in adopting dialogue to address difficult themes: George Berkeley and David Hume.[19] After the largely unfavourable reception of *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), Berkeley recognized that he needed to elucidate 'certain principles' of his idealist philosophy 'more clearly and fully'. His *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonus* (1713) is designed 'to place' those principles 'in a new light'.[20] While Hume is the exponent of an empiricist materialism diametrically opposed to Berkeley's idealism, he shares with Berkeley the literary precept that dialogue is a congenial form for the treatment of 'obscure and uncertain'

[15] Sara Coleridge to F. D. Maurice, 27 November, 1843. SC's emphasis. This unpublished collection of letters is held in the Harry Ransom Center. References hereafter in text, using the initials 'SC' and 'FDM'.

[16] Sara Coleridge to Henry Crabb Robinson, August or September 1846. Henry Crabb Robinson Correspondence 1846, DWL 56. Unpublished letters of Sara Coleridge to Henry Crabb Robinson held in the Archive of Dr Williams's Library, London. Transcripts by James Vigus and Hilary Newman, with thanks to the Director and Trustees of Dr Williams's Library. References hereafter in text, using the initials 'SC' and 'HCR'. I thank James Vigus for his generosity in making available to me the transcripts of this important correspondence.

[17] *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge edited by Her Daughter*, 2nd edition, 2 vols (Henry King, 1873), II, p. 15, p. 127.

[18] *View of the State of Ireland* was written around 1596 but not published until 1633.

[19] Markright holds Berkeley's philosophy in high regard: 'Berkeley proved that the word 'matter' – a substrate for accidents and qualities, primary and secondary, is no objective reality, but a mere form of thought, and his proof stands firm to this day' (SRW, p. 139).

[20] George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, edited by Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 118. References hereafter in text: *Three Dialogues*.

topics.[21] A reader's interest may be captured by 'the vivacity of conversation' in a dialogue, and a topic may be illuminated by 'the variety of lights' shed upon it 'by various personages and characters' (DNR 29). In a similar vein, Sara Coleridge's Markright contrasts the enabling intimacy and fluidity of 'private questioning' in a dialogue with the fixed statements of a 'book or pamphlet' (HRC).

Sara Coleridge's approach to the genre shows affinities with Ciceronian dialogue. Her project to subject 'the theology of all parties' to critical examination recalls Cicero's conception that the 'object' of dialogue is 'to discover the truth, stating the arguments both for and against all philosophic theories'.[22] In *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), Hume seeks to achieve a 'balanced presentation of opposed positions', and, as J. C. A. Gaskin observes, takes Cicero as his model (DNR, xxiii). This methodological affinity between Sara Coleridge and her sceptical predecessor sheds light upon her literary development and use of dialogue. Sara Coleridge is committed to representing her 'adversaries' opinions truly', while Hume similarly seeks to avoid that vulgar Error […] of putting nothing but Nonsense into the Mouth of an Adversary' (Extracts, 249. DNR, 25). Hume suggests that academic balance will be achieved by a process of multiple authorship:

> I have often thought, that the best way of composing a Dialogue, wou'd be for two Persons that are of differing Opinions about any Question of Importance, to write alternately the different Parts of the Discourse, and reply to each other. (DNR 25)

What Hume proposes, in effect, is the composition of a dialogue by an extended exchange of correspondence. This implies a close epistemological connection between the forms of letter and dialogue.

This kinship reflects the importance of letter writing in Sara Coleridge's literary development and her adoption of dialogue; most notably, her correspondence on religious themes with F. D. Maurice, Henry Crabb Robinson and Aubrey de Vere. During her intensive exchange of letters with Maurice in 1843–44, for example, occasioned by the publication of 'On Rationalism', Sara Coleridge celebrates the opportunity correspondence affords for the critical interchange of ideas: 'nothing pleases me more', she explains, 'than to have my notions taken up and discussed, whether for confirmation or objection, and I do as I would be done by in stating the difficulties which occur to me in the theories of others' (SC to FDM, 21 November 1843, HRC).[23] In this cordially open approach, she is committed to stating directly her points of difference with a correspondent—'fair words without candour are

[21] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 30. References hereafter in text: DNR.

[22] Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, translated by Horace C. P. McGregor (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 74. References hereafter in text: NG.

[23] The present author's study of the unpublished correspondence of 1843–44 between Sara Coleridge and F. D. Maurice, entitled '"Unity of Faith amid Diversity of Opinion": Sara Coleridge and Frederick Denison Maurice in Dialogue', appears in *Literature and Theology* 33. 2 (June 2019), pp. 165–185.

worse than nothing', she tells Maurice—and to expressing with forthright plainness those tenets which she holds to be scriptural and rational. (SC to FDM, 27 November 1843, HRC). Such considerations underlie Sara Coleridge's representation of conflicting viewpoints in *Dialogues on Regeneration*.

In the 'Introductory Dialogue', Marvell proposes to Markright that they should 'review' together 'the doctrine of the new birth', and 'discuss the whole subject methodically' (SRW 118). Initially, it seems that their extended discourse will present opposing arguments with Ciceronian balance. Markright indicates that he is open-minded about the outcome of the discussions and accepts that Marvell's position may prove eventually to be more robust than his own. Significantly, Markright proposes that the discussions adhere to a systematic structure, designed to ensure a balanced and even-handed procedure: he and Marvell are 'to try the question' of 'spiritual Regeneration' in 'the three several Courts of Reason, Revelation, and Theology'. Each heading of the investigation is to be treated 'separately'. Markright prescribes this framework to correct the undisciplined practice of the sectarian dogmatist who 'has nothing in his mind but the prevalent opinions of his own party' (HRC).

The scene would appear initially to be set for an open, critical investigation of the topic in hand, in which differing viewpoints are tested and questioned dispassionately, as in Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*. A dialogue, though, may not necessarily be even-handed after the academic Ciceronian manner, nor 'dialogic' in the modern Bakhtinian sense of offering an epistemologically open space for an inclusive interchange of ideas, free from, or subversive of, authoritarian constraint.[24] As Simon Goldhill observes, in its Greek origins dialogue is a 'conflicted' form, reflected in 'the tension in Platonic writing between the drive towards ideal, normative, authoritative knowledge and the slipperiness and playfulness of dialogue as a means of expression'.[25]

Such a tension underlies *Dialogues on Regeneration*, in which Sara Coleridge assembles a company of participants who hold a range of different religious views, representing the spectrum of controversial opinion in 1850–51. However, the potential open-endedness of her scenario is undermined by the 'authoritative', didactic 'drive' of her characters, whose intense emotional investment in their own particular viewpoint militates against free and open discussion. Sara Coleridge, writing in and for troubled times, exploits the contradictions of her form to expose the factors which subvert productive 'interchange of thought' (OR 1848 237). This aspect of her project is inseparable from the conceptual exploration of the contested questions. As Markright observes, the content of 'doctrinal statements' is integral to the 'mode' in which they are expressed (SRW 114).

[24] Simon Goldhill, 'Why Don't Christians do Dialogue?' in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, edited by Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 1–11, (p. 9).
[25] Goldhill, *End of Dialogue*, p. 4, p. 3.

'Debate has its Limits': Dogmatism and Dramatic Form

Sara Coleridge names each protagonist according to demeanour. Brightwit Lyttelthocht, Mr Wilford Thychnesse, Cloudsley Hyflyte, and Newbolt all display an essential flaw. They are reluctant to listen, and consequently fail to process others' viewpoints, refusing to entertain ideas which oppose their own pre-conceptions. Mr Thychnesse, for example, holds that the value of 'debate has its limits' if his interlocutors 'can't be convinced' by his arguments (SRW 155). He engages in discussion in order to enforce the rightness of his own tenets, and explains to Irenia and Una that he has 'studied the subject of regeneration not in order to discover the truth but that I may defend it against its enemies' (SRW 151). He dismisses religious ideas that oppose his fixed notions as errors arising from 'a cold hard fruitless Rationalism' (HRC). Thychnesse, Newbolt and Hyflyte dismiss as 'rationalism' any idea with which they disagree.

Brightwit Lyttelthocht, meanwhile, is concerned with style rather than substance: 'he always has something bright to say', and 'furnishes the ornamental' contributions to discussion, but his language lacks clarity or precision (SRW 113). In attempting to define baptismal regeneration, he switches from 'one metaphorical mode of speech to another' and fails to communicate the content of his idea (SRW 130). Anglo-Catholic writing employs colourful, figurative language, according to Sara Coleridge, but avoids precise conceptual terminology: its 'glittering', ostentatious 'style', its 'animated flow' is unfitted 'to trace out the fine lines of doctrine, the real systems of thought that possess the minds of men' (Extracts 251). Brightwit Lyttelthocht and Wilford Thychnesse, despite their intellectual and linguistic limitations, are sociable and courteous; they maintain genial good humour, even in disagreement. Here, for example, Lyttelthocht jokes that Marvell's current line of argument is

> an *igniis fatuus* – a will o' the wisp, which will lead us into the marshes of metaphysics, 'til we are stuck fast in the mire, and carry away nothing but weariness and muddy water.
>
> *Marvell:* The purest lymph that ever flowed from Hyppocrene or Cistaly, received into the mind of a non-metaphysical brain, becomes muddy water.
>
> *Lyttelthocht:* Is that compliment intended for Markright or for me, or are we to divide the mud between us? (SRW, 186)

Lyttelthocht's pleasantly facetious tone reflects the sociable toleration, the 'kindly and respectful spirit', which Sara Coleridge advocates in religious debate (Extracts 257).

Hyflyte and Newbolt, by contrast, approach discussion with assertive aggression:

> *Markright:* Personality is real, objectively real, in a being endued with

> reason and a reason-illumined will; considered abstractly from the will it is but a thought of the mind —
> *Hyflyte:* A thought of the mind! Yes! Yes! This is just that vicious nominalism which our author so triumphantly exposes.[26] That hollow system of mere leger-de-main, or leger de brain —
> *Markright:* Stop Hyflyte. Do not soar away quite so fast through the sky of assumption and conjecture. I have never denied personality to be real and objective. I deny that it is real and objective as distinct from our spiritual being at large. […] Do I deny the objective solidity of that table on which you have bestowed such vigorous thumps, in reprobation of my supposed obtuseness and heterodoxy, because I deny solidity *in abstracto*, to be a distinct essence?
> *Hyflyte:* You have just been told that according to this sound and admirable theory, nature and personality subsist only in and through each other. All wisdom will not die with you, Phosphilus Markright! Yea, who knoweth not such things as these? (SRW 186–87)

The combative Hyflyte hits a table, while Newbolt expresses disagreement 'angrily, and with much contempt of look and voice' (HRC). His language of condemnation is extreme: the 'rationalism' he imputes to Markright is 'a vile exhalation' from a 'foul corrupt marsh of German unsoundness and infidelity' (SRW 145). At one point, he becomes so heated as to refuse to participate any further, and takes his ill-tempered leave:

> *Newbolt:* I see no use in prolonging this discussion, Markright. […] Christians cannot stay to strip the enemies of the Church of their weapons; it is enough if they have taken off their chariot wheels so that they drive —
> *Markright:* What – without wheels?
> *Newbolt:* I say we are content with having dragged the wheels off their chariots of war and thrown their ranks into confusion. We have better employment than to stand striving through the best hours of the day with combatants who are already vanquished in the eyes of all but their own misty-sighted faction, and who will never allow themselves to have been overcome even while they are rolling on the ground, and – and – and covering each other with dust.
> (Exit) (SRW 150)

Markright's sarcastic interjection is calculated to goad Newbolt's anger. Marvell, by contrast, remains silent until after Newbolt has left, when he observes regretfully: 'What a pity it is that so estimable a man as Newbolt does not add to his heat a little clear light' (SRW 150). Newbolt is not alone in applying tropes of battle to religion: the 'worthy Dean' Dr Wordsall refers,

[26] Nominalism is a theory of knowledge that rejects the objective reality of universal concepts ('universals'), and holds them to be mere names. Nominalism is associated with empiricism.

with no trace of irony, to his 'long warfare in the ministry' (SRW 150). Markright likewise adopts such imagery, referring proudly to his having 'measured swords' with the Anglo-Catholic cleric Novel Primitive (SRW 119).

Dialogue and the Problem of Authority

Markright expresses the author's religious philosophy, as known from her published writings and correspondence. He frequently substantiates arguments by reference to writings of STC edited by Sara Coleridge and her husband Henry: particularly, *Literary Remains* Volumes III and IV (1838–39), which treat religious themes. Had these volumes received attention, Markright contends, divisive Tractarian doctrines might have never taken hold. For example, Tractarians had appropriated an argument for baptismal regeneration from the seventeenth-century theologian Jeremy Taylor. This reasoning had been 'examined years ago by [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge', Markright explains: 'his pointed exposure of its emptiness in the Literary Remains has been before the world since 1838, and has never even been noticed'. As a result of their ignorance of STC, Markright remonstrates, '[w]riters whose cobweb theories had been pulled apart before they ever sate down to spin, complain that their refinements and profundities have never been appreciated by opponents' (SRW 143).

Markright enlists STC's *Literary Remains* in refutation of Anglo-Catholic theology in the same way that Sara Coleridge adduces his *Aids to Reflection* in support of her anti-Tractarian arguments in 'On Rationalism'. At times, though, Markright expresses a more radical, fundamentalist Protestantism than Sara Coleridge in her published works. Marvell, for example, suspects that his arguments amount to a denial 'that Christian priests are stewards of spiritual mysteries' (SRW 170). Nonetheless, Markright's views are essentially those of the author, even when he expresses them in extreme terms. He warns that Anglo-Catholic 'dogma', though 'empty and light as a blown egg shell', may, 'in the hand of a domineering despotism […] acquire a crushing weight and become an instrument of grinding oppression' (SRW 115). In her essay 'On Rationalism', similarly, Sara Coleridge had cautioned that Anglo-Catholics sought ultimately to 'silence' opponents (OR 1848 238). Her satirical language can be as harsh as Markright's: Tractarian theology, she asserts, 'embodies the virus of superstition, which creeps like a cancer over the body of the Christian's faith, and, if uncounteracted, must inevitably reduce it to a lifeless and corrupting mass' (OR 1848 236).

Sara Coleridge's inclusion of a character who represents her own position has notable models among authors in the genre. In Plato's later dialogues, such as *Phaedo* and *The Republic*, for example, the interlocutor named Socrates is designed to promote Plato's philosophy. Of the two personae in Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland*, in which Eudoxus questions Irenaeus, who has recently travelled from Ireland, Irenaeus represents Spenser's own perspective. In Berkeley's *Three Dialogues*, Philonous expresses the author's idealist philosophy. In Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo voices the

sceptical empiricism we associate with Hume, until he retracts that position in the final section (which retraction he goes on to qualify). Having employed a character to represent the author's ideas, neither Hume nor Berkeley includes himself as a speaker in the work. Sara Coleridge, equally, does not feature as a persona in *Dialogues on Regeneration*, though her authorial voice is present in the footnotes.

Sara Coleridge's authorial interventions in her notes range from the casual to the polemically emphatic; from an expression of approval for Leibnitz as 'Sir Lucid Easy of Metaphysicians', to her directly addressing the reader in support of Markright's arguments:

> If any admirer of the theory under discussion demurs at the description in [Markright's] words in italics, I would ask him, what *he* understands by the author's language in the Doctrine of Holy Baptism at pages 26, 27, 47, 60, 118, 154, 155? (HRC; SC's emphasis)

She then challenges the reader to explain 'what is meant' by a further passage, which she quotes. Sara Coleridge had already employed this quasi-pedagogical technique in her 'Introduction' to *Essays on His Own Times*, in which she addresses readers in the imperative, directing them to a poignant paragraph in Aubrey de Vere's *English Misrule and Irish Misdeeds* (1849).[27] In 'Dialogues on Personality', Sara Coleridge concludes the footnote in which she seconds Markright's argument by supplying a decisive point in his favour. On 'p. 129' of *Doctrine of Holy Baptism*, she observes, Robert Wilberforce states that 'the corrupt will which opposes and prevents conversion is incompatible with the state of grace; but', she triumphantly challenges, 'how does this consist with the ascription of a state of grace to those whose corrupt will has never been changed or purified?' (HRC). Unlike Cicero, who, as a persona in *The Nature of the Gods* is in the role of 'listener, […] impartial and unprejudiced', Sara Coleridge's authorial voice merges with that of her leading protagonist (NG 77).

Nonetheless, there is a critical ambiguity in Sara Coleridge's construction of Markright. He is the exponent of the author's religious philosophy, but his conduct and language contravene her ethic of religious discourse. Markright relishes the combative possibilities of religious controversy and seizes opportunities to indulge in satirical irony and scathing sarcasm. He indulges a boisterous sense of humour at the expense of his interlocutors' sensitivities. He ridicules what he sees as the contradictions of Anglo-Catholic doctrine by describing an 'emblematic picture', in which 'the unbaptised saints' of the Old Testament are depicted as 'Angels clad in convict dresses' alongside the 'baptized worldlings' of modern times, who appear as 'troops of fiends and satyrs, clad in snowy robes with crowns of gold upon their horrid heads' (HRC). The image, as Markright must have foreseen, upsets Irenia. On another occasion, he anticipates with exuberant glee a future in which the clergyman

[27] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Essays on His Own Times*, edited by his daughter, 3 vols (London: William Pickering, 1850), I, p. xli.

Novel Primitive, bereft of institutional authority, is reduced to helpless humiliation (SRW 118). Like Hume's protagonist Philo, Markright often argues 'in a vehement manner, somewhat between jest and earnest', and expresses himself with ebullient 'wantonness' (DNR 52, 55).[28] His vehemence adds dramatic vitality, and impacts upon the religious theme of the work.

Markright's pointedly satirical language is as vividly figurative as that of Lyttelthocht. He alleges that Anglo-Catholic 'dogmas' defy 'the laws of language' and 'the laws of thought'; they are as insubstantial as a mere 'tissue like that which Arachne was reduced to wear after her metamorphosis, and more deserving of the true Minerva's wrath than that goodly web she wove before'. Anglo-Catholic 'dogmatizers', he mocks, are 'nothing half so respectable' as 'spiders', who

> with their webs catch wherewithal to satisfy hunger: but [haughty?] dogmatism serves to exalt the shepherd without furnishing a morsel for his flock:
>
> 'The hungry sheep look up and are not fed'—[29]
>
> Indeed they hardly look up, but go nid-nid-nodding for the most part (SRW 121.)

The change of trope in mid-sentence introduces the quotation from *Lycidas*, which, invoking Milton's combative radicalism, adds to the satirical vigour of the passage. Irenia tries to restrain Markright's arrogant bluster: he is 'too sharp to be wise', she remonstrates, and reminds him that he has not substantiated his sweeping allegations: 'such charges as you make are easier uttered than proven' (SRW 121). Marvell, meanwhile, censures his 'arrogance' and 'wild sort of talk' (SRW 119).

Markright tends to dismiss others' viewpoints indiscriminately, sometimes complacently. When he mocks Marvell's argument that the soul receives a 'capability of Christian excellence' in baptism, Marvell cautions that such flippancy may prove to be rash:

> You may laugh, Markright; but no one knows better than you how many a true and deep doctrine has been laughed down for a time[;] how 'coxcombs have vanquished Berkeley with a grin' (SRW 138).[30]

Some of Irenia's contributions elicit from Markright particularly dismissive expressions of satirical amusement. His gendered condescension reflects the patriarchal arrogance which Sara Coleridge herself had encountered—and resisted—in her domineering brother Derwent and her brother-in-law John Taylor Coleridge. When Irenia declares her eagerness to explain 'the practical importance' of Anglo-Catholic teaching, Markright invites her to speak, but prefaces the invitation with disparaging laughter, and dismisses the content of

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[28] I am indebted to James Vigus for his suggestion that Hume's Philo might be a model for Markright's polemical vehemence. This suggestion prompted my investigation of the dialogue tradition and *Dialogues on Regeneration*.

[29] Milton, *Lycidas*, l. 125.

[30] John Brown, *An Essay on Satire: Occasioned by the Death of Mr. Pope* (1745), ll. 223-24.

her exposition before she has even begun.[31]

At the outset, Markright seems to aspire to a questioning, probing style, like Socrates in Plato's early dialogues, such as *Euthyphro* and *Protagoras*. However, his intense investment in his Protestant philosophy leads him into the didactic mode of Protagoras, Socrates's dogmatic interlocutor. Like Protagoras, who 'drags out long speeches […] going on and on' until his listeners have 'forgotten what the question was about', Markright delivers lengthy monologues of which his interlocutors lose the thread.[32] Even the conscientious listener Marvell complains, 'I have *laboured* to follow your mind, Markright' (SRW 141). The senior High Churchman, Dr. Wordsall, a courteous and measured interlocutor, finds it necessary to restrain Markright's proclivity to monologue: '[y]ou go on so fast, my good friend, that I cannot follow you' (HRC).

Marvell points out a further inconsistency in Markright's approach. He refuses to accept the authority of the Church on matters of doctrine, but invokes STC as the touchstone of philosophical truth: 'S T Coleridge again! The Pope of your Christian Philosophy!' Marvell observes. Markright replies that STC is an authority who encourages the questioning of authority, including his own. In practice, though, Markright appeals to STC in the same way as Pythagoreans appeal to 'the master', a practice which Cicero rejects as prejudicial to genuine dialogue (NG 73). Markright's lengthy monologues are not a pre-meditated tactic to evade genuine interchange, as in the case of Plato's self-promoting Protagoras; nor are his frequent appeals to philosophical authority. They arise from a passionate commitment to his principles, which inevitably draws him into a didactic mode. The inescapable irony is that Markright, the exponent of a rational, liberal, individualistic theology, resorts to dogmatic forms of language and argument. This irony was urgently applicable to the tensions of Sara Coleridge's times, and to her own religious authorship.

'Dialogues on Regeneration': Didactic or Open-Ended?

An essential question remains: to what extent is *Dialogues on Regeneration* open-ended in its presentation of religious ideas and attitudes? Does it leave the subjects under discussion ultimately to the determination of the reader, like Ciceronian dialogue? Or is it fundamentally didactic in the manner of Plato's later dialogues, St Augustine's *Against the Academics*, and Berkeley's *Hylas and Philonous*?[33] The ways in which Sara Coleridge concludes individual dialogues, and closes the work as a whole, are significant in this respect. Cicero's 'practice' is 'to end a dialogue by representing the interlocutors locked in continuing disagreement […] and acknowledging the need for further argument'.[34] *The*

[31] The gender politics of *Dialogues on Regeneration* require a separate and substantial study.

[32] Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, translated by Adam Beresford (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 42.

[33] According to Michael Foley, St. Augustine 'chose the philosophical dialogue as the means of goading' his readers towards intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. St. Augustine, *Against the Academics: St. Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues*, translated by Michale P. Foley, 4 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), I, p. xxviii.

[34] Michael Schofield (no relation to the present author), 'Ciceronian Dialogue', in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, pp. 63–84, (p. 71).

Nature of the Gods, for example, concludes with a casually non-committal observation by the persona Cicero:

> This then was the end of our discussion and we went our ways, Velleius thinking that Cotta had the best of the argument while to me it seemed that the reasoning of Balbus brought us nearer to an image of the truth. (NG 235)

The Nature of the Gods offers no final, definitive judgment; the questions raised remain open. In *Dialogues on Regeneration*, individual dialogues finish with characters remaining in disagreement, their positions unchanged, issues unresolved, often complicated further by new contradictions introduced in the course of the dialogue in question.

In 'Scriptural Dialogues', for example, Markright interrogates the Catholic tenet that the meaning of Scripture is established by the Church. He argues that Scripture should be interpreted according to literary critical criteria. His methodology adduces contextual, historical and linguistic factors, including examination of the semantic history of Biblical words and phrases, and analysis of how they have been translated from Greek. Although Marvell acknowledges the intellectual cogency of Markright's approach, he cannot accept its religious validity:

> I'm quite convinced that this great mystery cannot be determined by the mere words of Scripture, interpreted by human philosophy. We must first learn the mind of the Church, and by the light of Church doctrine must read the otherwise dark places of Scripture. (HRC)

The Church, for Marvell, is the authoritative source of religious illumination.

Markright responds with angry frustration at what he sees as closed-minded intransigence:

> This is just what I have foreseen from the first. Your views are not really drawn from Scripture naturally interpreted. [They] are derived from what you call the Church, that is the collective divinity interpreted by your own party and school as it exists at present. (HRC)

The 'Scriptural Dialogues' thus end in an impasse. The problem is unresolved: is Scripture to be understood according to the authority of the Church? Or to be investigated by academic hermeneutics? Markright fears that the discussions have become futile:

> Well[,] we will next examine the evidence of theologians; though I suspect that even here you will expect to [interpret?] testimony by your own principles, and the debate will in the end resolve itself into this, that the majority of so-called High Churchmen maintain the dogma of passive momentary regeneration; a fact which was known to us and denied by no one, before we began the argument. (HRC)

The interlocutors remain 'locked in disagreement' to the extent that Markright

seems inclined to abandon the discussions.

Nonetheless, conversations proceed. The series 'Dialogues on Personality', begun in September 1851 and completed in November, six months before Sara Coleridge's death, is devoted to a specific line of inquiry. These dialogues focus on recent influential works by an Anglo-Catholic theologian of high repute: Archdeacon Robert Wilberforce. The Archdeacon argues that human nature is divided into two quite distinct and separate components: the individual personality and the general human nature common to the whole race. According to Wilberforce, it was our general human nature which fell when Adam and Eve sinned, and it is this general nature which is restored in the moment of baptism. The individual personality is not subject to the spiritual regeneration conveyed in baptism and may remain unaffected by it. Wilberforce designed this 'divisional theory' of human nature in order to answer a major objection to Anglo-Catholic theology: that so many people who have been baptized lead blatantly irreligious lives (SRW 180). Sara Coleridge had emphasized this objection in her earlier religious writings.

The 'Dialogues on Personality' are different in character from the earlier series of dialogues: their methodology is consistently philosophical, that of 'metaphysical science' (HRC). Their critical range, also, is more narrowly concentrated, analysing one particular strand of Anglo-Catholic thought, rather than ranging across academic divinity more broadly. This closely focused enquiry yields a different outcome to that of 'Scriptural Dialogues'. The first dialogue in the series, though, begins abruptly, with Markright in irritable mood:

> Aye, that is ever the way. The last new work, which your opponent has not read, is to quell all doubts, and settle the whole question, and the author, till his wondrous pile of argument has been visited, passes for the Irrefragable Doctor. Just so travellers extol as the one thing worth seeing the one thing which a dear friend has happened to miss. (SRW 180)

Markright anticipates that the 'new work' will be deployed as a definitive authority in order to block critical enquiry.

Markright implies that he has not read Wilberforce's work, but is not being candid: as will transpire, he is thoroughly acquainted with the Archdeacon's *Doctrine of Holy Baptism* (1849), and his *Sermons on the New Birth of Man's Nature* (1850). Initially, Markright feigns ignorance as a critical tactic in order to elicit from Cloudsley Hyflight and Marvell an introductory exposition of Wilberforce's fundamental arguments, which he pretends to be encountering for the first time. There is a satirical undertone to Markright's questioning of Hyflyte and Marvell, in which he refers to Wilberforce as 'your learned theorist', and exclaims in amazement at certain ideas, and repeats others as if to check that the 'Irrefragable Doctor' has really advanced such an outlandish proposition (SRW 183, 180). When Markright at length admits to having studied Wilberforce's works, he proceeds to subject them to systematic critical analysis through the remaining five dialogues in the series. He is seconded with

acuity and eloquence by his sister Una, who ultimately demonstrates to Hyflyte a decisive contradiction in Wilberforce's theory. Hyflyte, however, whose attitude towards Markright's liberal religious philosophy is particularly scathing, refuses to reconsider his position. Marvell, though, quietly ponders the arguments presented by Una and Markright. At the conclusion of the final dialogue, Markright observes that Marvell is thoughtful: 'Marvell you are musing. Do you still hold this divisional doctrine to be defensible?' (SRW 193)

Marvell's reply reveals that he has rejected Wilberforce's position on the grounds advanced by Una and Markright: he agrees that there cannot exist

> any personal principle in man distinct from reason, which is common to mankind, and a distinguishing part of human nature, any principle of individual responsibility distinct from the moral will, – objectively and really *distinct*, as well as logically distinguishable. (SRW 194)

Having rejected Wilberforce's construction of a divided human nature on grounds which are based on STC's conception of Reason, Marvell reads a passage from STC's *Literary Remains*, which, he says, gives 'a beautiful description' of spiritual regeneration, in which 'the will', when it

> placeth itself in a right line with the reason, there ariseth the spirit, through which the will of God floweth into and actuates the will of man, so that it willeth the things of God. (SRW 194)

Marvell's reading from *Literary Remains* occurs in the dialogue's final speech, which is also the concluding speech of *Dialogues on Regeneration* as a whole.

That *Dialogues on Regeneration* conclude with Marvell's quoting STC seems to vindicate Markright's religious philosophy; just as the ending of Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* supports Philonous's idealism. Near the end of the final dialogue, Hylas declares that he now grasps the import of Philonous's arguments. Before their conversations, Hylas 'saw things by a dim light, and through false glasses. Now the glasses are removed', he proclaims, 'and a new light breaks in upon my understanding' (*Three Dialogues* 207). However, baptismal regeneration, unlike Berkeley's theme, is not a purely intellectual question pertaining exclusively to formal philosophy or theoretical divinity: it embraces the living realities of religious experience and practice. When Irenia draws attention to the devotional 'piety' and 'spiritual simplicity' of Pusey's writings, Markright dismisses her observation as irrelevant to intellectual enquiry. Her objection is highly significant: 'But […] theory is a vehicle for the spiritual substance', she maintains, '—Else how is it worth contending about? (SRW, 145). For Irenia, the formulation of doctrine must serve the living practice of Christianity.

In commending STC's definition of regeneration for its 'beauty', Marvell appeals to the same Catholic devotional criterion as Irenia in her admiration of Anglo-Catholic authors, and the earlier theologians who influence their views. She is deeply moved by the 'beauty' of the Tractarian Henry Manning's description of baptism, for example, and suggests that a 'beautiful' passage on

the 'Communion of Saints' by the seventeenth-century royalist divine John Pearson 'breathe[s] such a deep spirit of peace and spiritual unitedness' as to disarm mere intellectual disagreement (SRW 146, 174). Whatever conceptual shortcomings Markright might allege of St Chrysostom's writings on St Paul, Irenia prioritizes Chrysostom's contributions to practical devotion, who, she reminds Markright, 'has framed a divine prayer to [our] common Father in heaven' (SRW 165). From the same Catholic perspective, Marvell cites the passage from *Literary Remains* as a practical aid to spiritual contemplation, rather than a definitive academic formulation. Significantly, in the 1830s, both Pusey and Newman had recognized the contribution of STC's writings in creating a culture receptive to Catholic spirituality.[35]

Marvell's change of view about Wilberforce's 'new divisional theory' of human nature does not repudiate the central Catholic tenet which he has maintained throughout: that the content of belief is to be determined by 'the mind of the Church' (HRC). *Dialogues on Regeneration* as a whole presents a range of religious attitudes and ideas. The ultimate ambiguity of the work lies in the contradiction that the protagonist who upholds the author's religious philosophy blatantly breaches her ethical code for the conduct of discourse. Equally, the characters whose demeanour and language respect those principles are Anglo-Catholics: Irenia, who of all Sara Coleridge's characters expresses the most moving and eloquent accounts of religious experience; and Marvell, whose humility and integrity Una celebrates in the penultimate speech of the whole work:

> A marvel, a marvel! Irenia, your brother is worthy of his name and in a good and noble sense too: for he has allowed himself to be instructed by the reasonings of an opponent, and is not afraid to correct his views lest their improvement should be ascribed to powers of thought beyond his own. For one controversialist who has the thought of mind to own his opinion changed in the course of debate, there are fifty thousand who can make a shew of maintaining their opinion against all the reasoning in the world. (SRW 194)

Marvell's change of viewpoint, as much as Markright's philosophical refutation of Wilberforce, is the source of the upbeat mood on which *Dialogues on Regeneration* concludes.

Marvell is not a character in the mould of Plato's Protagoras, who seeks to avoid genuine, sociable intellectual exchange in order to uphold his own prestige. He is, rather, a conscientious inquirer into the nature of conflicting religious ideas in troubled times, which is why he instigates the discussions with Markright in the first place; and who, like Sara Coleridge herself, is prepared to admit that sometimes he might be wrong. As Una suggests,

[35] Westhaver, George, Derrick (2012) *The Living Body of the Lord: E. B. Pusey's 'Types and Prophecies of the Old Testament'*, Durham Theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.durham.ac.uk//6373. See 117–120; 130–133; 176–178. John Henry Newman, 'The State of Religious Parties', in the *British Critic*, April 1839, 395–426 (400).

Marvell's self-effacing open-mindedness makes him one in 'fifty thousand'. Her speech implies that the resolution of England's religious divisions might be found in the Catholic ethos of humility, which, ironically, her brother Markright lacks. This ending is intellectually inconclusive; like that of Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*, it leaves any definitive adjudication to the reader. The ambiguities implicit at the close of *Dialogues on Regeneration* urge the reader to review the contrasting ideas and attitudes which the work has presented. Sara Coleridge conceives of the dialogue genre as opening a space for free, dynamic interchange, into which a reader is encouraged to enter as virtual participant.