Coleridge's Trichotomous Theology

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COLERIDGE'S ENTHUSIASM FOR UNITARIANISM in his twenties is well-known, and Kathleen Coburn suggests that we can find "his first recorded explicit statement of Trinitarianism" in his notebook in 1805. (CN II 2444 17.18) After that he would never throw away his affection or dedication to the Church. During his lifetime, especially during the first two decades of the 19th century, the situation surrounding the Church of England was never stable. The Irish Question connecting to Catholic Emancipation dominated English politics, stirred fierce passions and divided parties. Inside the Church of England, Paley's natural theology representing his utilitarian ethics could not satisfy contemporary intellectuals. Outside the Church, the Baptists and Congregationalists were preoccupied with their own spiritual and political activities, the English Presbyterians had strong leanings to Unitarianism, in an Arian or a Socinian form, and Methodist groups had developed apart from the established church against the will of the founder, John Wesley.

Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825) was aimed at revitalising the Church of England and unifying the Christians outside and inside the Church. Nearing the conclusion of his text, he mentions the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the gospels of *Paul* and *John*, all of which advocate the accordance and harmony of all Christians.[1] For this purpose, he needed to make his own interpretations of Christian doctrines, such as original sin, free-will and grace, and redemption, convincing to his contemporaries. After clearing the road of all counterfeits, he describes his efforts as follows:

> And this was followed by an attempt to establish a difference in kind between religious truths and the deductions of speculative science; yet so as to prove, that the former are not only equally rational with the latter, but that they alone appeal to Reason in the fullness and living reality of the Power. (AR 304)

His attempt in *Aids to Reflection* was to demonstrate that we can apprehend the living reality of the divine power by the faculty of reason, making the Christian doctrines convincing to his contemporaries by rational explanation. It also served as his vindication of Christian doctrines.

Then, who was the best precursor to help him in his trial? It would be difficult to specify only one source, but if we consider Coleridge's aim, that is, revitalising the Church and unifying the Christians, we could say that he had a particular debt to Richard Baxter, one of the most influential church leaders of the nonconformists in the 17th century. Baxter, ejected from the Episcopal Church, continued his struggle to reconcile the opposition between the

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[1] AR 380. *John* x 16, (Wall's John xvii 11); *Acts* ii 46, iv 32; 1 *Cor.* i 10, 11, 12, and 2, 3, 4, the whole 12th chapter; *Eph.* ii 18, &c. to the end, iii 6, iv 1-13; *Phil.* ii 1, 2. iii 15, 16; *Gal.* v 20, 21; *Rom.* the 14th chapter, part of the 15th, to ver.7, and xv 17.

Episcopal Church and the Independents. Coleridge describes Baxter as

> … a logician [who]… first applied the tri-fold or tri-une demonstration. … He also first introduced the method of argument, that the thing or reason given contains a positive and its opposite…
> (Allsop I 133-34; M I 230)[2]

Both of them were at crisis points of the schism; and Coleridge shared the same aim of unifying the Christians with Baxter. For this purpose he offered a reinterpretation of Christian doctrines trying to convince his contemporaries and trying to establish the groundwork of the Church of Christ. The key idea of his reinterpretation was applying the tri-fold demonstration, for which Coleridge expressed a particular debt to Baxter. To clarify Coleridge's debt to Baxter is the aim of this paper.

Before discussing the relationship between Coleridge and Baxter, Coleridge's criticism of Jeremy Taylor's interpretation of Original Sin serves as an example of "the deductions of speculative science". Coleridge criticized Taylor severely in *Aids to Reflection* and Marginalia of *Polemicall Discourses.*

> Original Sin, according to his conception, is a Calamity which being common to all men must be supposed to result from their common Nature: in other words, the universal Calamity of Human *Nature!*
> (AR 273)

> The consequence then of Adam's Crime was, by a natural necessity, inherited by Persons who could not (the Bishop affirms) in any sense have been accomplices in the crime or partakers in the guilt: and yet consistently with the divine Holiness, it was not possible that the same perfect Obedience should not be required of them… not only the consequence of Adam's act, but the penalty due to his crime, was perpetuated. (AR 277-78)

Taylor considers original sin within chronological time. According to him, it is unreasonable and unfair for guiltless people to be alienated from God forever because they inherited their ancestors' sin. As Coleridge suggests, if we try to interpret the doctrine of original sin just within chronological time and phenomenal space, we cannot overcome the absurdity of the doctrine.

On the other hand, Coleridge discusses the issue of cause in relation to original sin as follows:

> NOT the Origin of Evil, NOT the *Chronology* of Sin, or the chronicles of the original Sinner; but Sin originant, underived from without, and no passive link in the adamantine chain of Effects, each of which is in its turn an *instrument* of Causation, but no one of them a Cause! (AR 257)

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[2] Allsop: [Thomas Allsop] *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S. T. Coleridge* (2 vols 1836).

According to Coleridge, original sin does not derive from any external cause, but has its origin within human existence itself. Coleridge distinguishes chronological time and phenomenal space, that is, *Nature,* from the dimension beyond time and space where the Will operates.

> Nature is a Line in constant and continuous evolution. Its *beginning* is lost in the Super-natural; and *for our understanding,* therefore, it must appear as a continuous line without beginning or end. But where there is no discontinuity there can be no origination, and every appearance of origination in *Nature* is but a shadow of our own casting. It is a reflection from our own *Will* or Spirit. Herein, indeed, the will consists. This is the essential character by which WILL is *opposed* to Nature, as *Spirit,* and raised *above* Nature as *self-determining* Spirit—this, namely, that it is a power of *originating* an act or state. (AR 268n)

According to Coleridge, our understanding cannot grasp the beginning or origin in Nature. We can just reflect on the origin by our Will or Spirit. As John Beer, the editor of *Aids to Reflection,* indicates, Coleridge suggests "a distinction between sins as they are perceived in their effects and in the world and the original offence behind all sins, which is regarded as being in common between all mankind and committed out of the time-process altogether." (AR 262n) Coleridge defines original sin as follows:

> Sin is Evil having an *Origin.* But inasmuch as it is *evil,* in God it cannot originate: and yet in some *Spirit* (*i.e.* in some *supernatural* power) it *must.* For in *Nature* there is no origin. Sin therefore is spiritual Evil: but the spiritual in Man is the Will… and when we would further express the truth, that this corrupt *Nature* of the Will must in some sense or other be considered as its own act, that the corruption must have been self-originated; — in this case and for this purpose we may… entitle this dire spiritual evil and source of all evil, that is absolutely such, Original Sin. (AR 273)

Coleridge considers Original Sin not within phenomenal time and space but in absolute time and space or the dimension of the Will or Spirit. The origin of human evil is within human will and the human will is spiritual beyond phenomenal time and space. This human will towards evil is the basis of what he calls Original Sin, and he discusses his idea of the Will as follows:

> The Will is ultimately self-determined, or it is no longer a *Will* under the law of perfect Freedom, but a *Nature* under the mechanism of Cause and Effect… And the ground-work of *Personal* Being is a capacity of acknowledging the Moral Law (the Law of the Spirit, the Law of Freedom, the Divine Will) as that which should, of itself, suffice to determine the Will to a free obedience of the Law, the Law working

> therein *by its own exceeding lawfulness*. This, and this alone, is *positive* Good, good in itself, and independent of all relations… and as all moral Evil (*i.e.* all evil that is evil without reference to its contingent physical consequences) is *of* the Will, this evil Will must have its source in the Will. (AR 285-86)

There are three significant points in this paragraph. First, Coleridge distinguishes Moral Law or the Divine Will from Natural Law or the mechanism of Cause and Effect. Second, the Divine Will affects the human will directly and human beings choose freely either to obey the Divine Will or not to obey it. Third, the will of human beings against the Divine Will is evil and the evil will has its source within itself. He calls this "evil Ground" Original Sin. (AR 288) Moreover, he calls this work of the human will responding to the Divine Will a "*Mystery*":

> It is a *Mystery,* that is, a Fact, which we see, but cannot explain; and the doctrine a truth which we apprehend, but can neither comprehend nor communicate. (AR 288)

Coleridge believes that human beings should respond to the Divine Will, but that work is beyond human comprehensibility. We can only apprehend it. Where then did he find the notion that we must act in response to our apprehension rather than our comprehension of the Divine Will? An answer to this question emerges in the dialogue between Coleridge and Baxter.

Coleridge remarks on the distinction between Reason and Understanding in detail in *Aids to Reflection,* and after that he suggests to his readers that "*reflecting* on religious subjects *aright,* and of their attaining to the *contemplation* of spiritual truths *at all,* rests on their insight into the *nature* of this disparity". (AR 224) His starting point for reinterpretating Christian doctrine was to distinguish Understanding which comprehends natural law, and Reason which apprehends moral law or the Divine Will, and integrates the natural law and the moral law.

Then, where and how can we apprehend the Divine Will? Where in our mind or spirit did Coleridge find the means of apprehending it? He is indebted to Richard Baxter for its answer. In his autobiography, Baxter discussed his evolving view of 'a Scheme, or Method of Physicks or Theology, which gave any Satisfaction to my Reason':

> I had been Twenty Six Years convinced that Dichotomizing will not do it; but that the Divine Trinity in Unity, hath exprest it self in the whole Frame of Nature and Morality… (M I 347)[3]

Coleridge commented on this passage.

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[3] Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae: or Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times. Faithfully Publish'd from his own original manuscript, by Matthew Sylvester.* London: 1696. Part III, p.69,§146

> Among Baxter's philosophical merits we ought not to overlook, that the substitution of Trichotomy for the old & still general plan of Dichotomy in the Method and Disposition of Logic, which forms so prominent & substantial an excellence in Kant's Critique of the Pure Reason, of the Judgement, &c belongs originally to Richard Baxter, a century before Kant—& this not as a Hint but as a fully evolved & systematically applied Principle. Nay, more than this! Baxter **grounded* it on an absolute idea *pre*supposed in all intelligential acts: whereas Kant takes it only as a *Fact* of Reflection… (M I 347-48)

Baxter substituted Trichotomy for Dichotomy in his theology a century before Kant. The important thing is, however, not his preceding of Kant but their differences. Kant also found out an idea "*pre*supposed in all intelligential acts", but for him it was not the absolute reality but "a Fact of Reflection" or a regulative idea. Baxter considered it the idea of the absolute reality unifying dichotomy. Coleridge connected this trichotomy to the Polar Logic.

> *On recollection I am disposed to consider *this* <alone> as Baxter's *peculiar* claim. I have not indeed any distinct memory of Giordano Bruno's Logica Venatrix Veritatis; but doubtless the principle of Trichotomy is necessarily involved in the Polar Logic: which again is the same with the Pythagorean *Tetractys* — i.e. the eternal Fountain or Source of Nature; …—Prothesis being by the very term anterior to Thesis can be no part of it—Thus in
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> Prothesis
>
> Thesis Antithesis
>
> Synthesis
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> we have the Tetrad indeed in the intellectual & intuitive Contemplation; but a Triad in discursive Arrangement, and a Tri-unity in Result.
>
> (M I 347-48n)

Coleridge often uses a tetractys to express his Trinitarian theology. When we find two opposites, we necessarily can conceive the source of the two opposites. This raises another question; that is, can we consider the Tri-unity, or the source of the two opposites, real or not? Coleridge addressed this question as marginalia in the beginning page of *Catholick Theologie* by Baxter.

> Instead of the dichotomy Real ÷ Unreal—or Thing: which are mere *words*—for What *is* not cannot be Nothing ⊙ opposed—and Reality can have no opposite, we should say—:
>
> Reality in finite existence has two forms actual & potential—/ the latter as truly *real* as the former—
>
> ⊙ irrelative + relative in correspondent antithesis to —. —relative in correspondent antithesis to +.

⊙ Real
+Actual —Potential

> In God alone the Actual and the Real are one and the same or the divine Reality excludes all potentiality—Actus purissimus sine ullâ potentialitate. (M I 231-32)

It is clear from reading Baxter's text[4] that Coleridge's marginalia analysed and charted Baxter's idea. Coleridge's particular debt to Baxter is the idea of God as unity of actuality and potentiality. The human understanding can know only the revealed divine actuality, but we cannot comprehend the potentiality, which we can only conceive or apprehend by our will or reason. However, God is always complete unity and has no potentiality. Only to human beings can God show two phases of actuality and potentiality, and this potentiality is as truly real as actuality. While Kant and Spinoza emphasized that human beings cannot comprehend the transcendent divine reality, this idea of the divine reality as unity of actuality and potentiality was critical for Coleridge to grasp the idea of God as the living reality. The divine potentiality or the Divine Will acts on the human will; because the two wills are both spiritual. The human will can respond towards the potentiality of the Divine Will.

Chart 1.[5]

The Divine Reality
/ \
the Moral Law/ potentiality the natural law/ actuality

Based upon such Trichotomy, Coleridge considers redemption as a two-way divine power:

> … *the fact or actual truth having been assured to us by Revelation,* it is not impossible, by stedfast meditation on the idea and super-natural character of a personal WILL, for a mind spiritually disciplined to satisfy itself, that the redemptive act *supposes* (and that our redemption is even negatively *conceivable* only on the supposition of) an Agent who can at once act *on* the Will as an exciting cause, *quasi ab extra,* and *in* the Will, as

[4] 23. II. And the *Formal Conceptus* [VITA] must it self be conceived of in this Threefold *inadequate Conception;* I. ☆*Potentia-Actus,* 2. *Intellectus,* 3. *Voluntas.* I call the first *Potentia-Actus,* to avoid Concretes, and to signifie, that as God hath no *Potentia Passiva,* so his *Potentia-Activa* is not an *idle cessant Power,* but in perpetual perfect Act, and that Act is a most *Powerful-Act:* so that neither *Potentia* alone, nor *Actus* alone, but both together, are our best Conception of this first Principle in the Deity. And I take it for granted, that even in *Mans soul,* the *Potentia-Vitalis Activa,* the *Intellect* and *Will,* are not as *Thomas* thought Accidents, but the *formal essence* of the soul, as the *Scotists* and *Nominals* better say; And I have largely elsewhere proved, and therefore stand not here upon it. (Richard Baxter, *Richard Baxter's Catholick Theology: Plain, Pure, Peaceable for Pacification of the Dogmatical Word-Warriours*. London, Printed by Robert White, 1675. Part I, Sect. III, p. 4.)

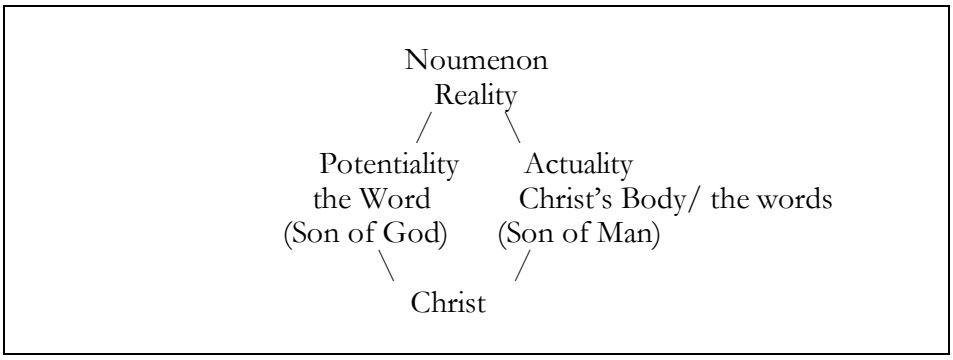
[5] All three charts are mine.

> the *condition* of its potential, and the *ground* of its actual, Being. (AR 335)

God's redemptive power affects human beings in two ways. One is by revelation, as an exciting cause *quasi ab extra* (="as if from outside"), and the other way is in the will as the condition of its potential. We can follow Coleridge's idea of Christ or the Word based upon the idea of the two-way divine redemptive power. In 1810, he had already pursued this idea:

> Remember too, that Christ's Body, as represented to the Eye, was Phaenomenon—but that the Body=Noumenon, with which the Logos was united, so becoming incarnate, was *Human Nature*—a mysterious thing, whose boundaries & laws of individualism we know not/ assuredly, as a noumenon, it is not bound to the conditions *of Space*— (June 1810) (CN III 3847 18.251)

Chart 2.



Christ or the Word, being both the son of God and the son of man, also acts in the two ways, potentially and actually. Christ's Body with which the Logos was united is part of the potentiality of the divine reality as well as part of the divinity actually revealed or incarnated. He concedes this is "a mysterious thing". In *Aids to Refection,* he sheds some light on this mystery. He discusses the indifferent point in the polar principle as the connecting point of the two different relations as follows:

> Every Line may be, and by the ancient Geometricians *was,* considered as a point *produced,* the two extremes being its poles, while the Point itself remains in, or is at least represented by, the midpoint, the Indifference of the two poles or correlative opposites. Logically applied, the two extremes or poles are named Thesis and Antithesis: thus in the line
>
> I
> T————————————————A

> We have T=Thesis, A=Antithesis, and I=Punctum Indifferens sive Amphotericum [“The point that is indifferent, partaking of both characters”, my trans.], which latter is to be conceived as *both* in as far as it may be *either* of the two former. Observe: not both at the same time in the same relation: for this would be the *Identity* of T and A, not the *Indifference*. But so, that relatively to A, I is equal to T, and relatively to T it becomes =A. (AR 179n)

Christ or the Word is the indifferent point of the two opposite poles of divine actuality and potentiality. He is the connecting point including two different relations or dimensions. He has one relation with Father as the Word in the super-natural or potential dimension and has the other relation with human beings as Jesus Christ or the words in the natural or actual dimension. In this way, Christ, the Word, is the symbol of the divine reality. This could be a post-Kantian reinterpretation of St. Augustine's *Tractates* on the *Gospel of John*.[6] Coleridge was deeply indebted to Baxter for this idea of trichotomy that Christ is the indifferent and connecting point of the divine actuality and potentiality. In *Aids to Reflection,* we do not find any reference by Coleridge to the historical Jesus Christ, but we can find Christ as a divine symbol or the indifferent point of the two opposite poles of potentiality and actuality. It may appear too abstract and logical to show the divine vision, and we may still have questions as to whether we can grasp the divine reality through such a theological trichotomy or not, and whether his theology could really transcend the limit of dualism or not. However, Coleridge logically suggests the existence of Christ as the mediator between the two different dimensions, the Spirit and the World. Through this idea of Christ he offers a model to conceive the divine existence keeping in mind both the limit of our understanding and the possibility of our reason. This became the fundamental idea of the Church of Christ which Coleridge would advocate from that time on and his achievement became one of the most potent spiritual influences of the 19th century.

Chart 3.

⟨the Word / Christ⟩ as the Indifferent point

<**Thesis**> (The Divine Will: potential) (The Moral law)

< **Indifferent Point** > (the Word/Christ) (potentiality + actuality)

<**Antithesis**> (the World: actual) (the natural law)

[6] Cf. *St. Augustine Tractates on the Gospel of John.* Especially Tractate 110 (John 17:21-23). Translated by John Gibb. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 7. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701110.htm>.