Coleridge, the Rime, and the Image of God: Humanness as Communion with Creator

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"AND GOD SAID, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth'" (Genesis 1:26, KJV). According to this scripture, humanity was created in the "Image of God" and set above all creation, and humans are different from other creatures and somehow sacred in their status as image-bearers. While theologians had debated the implications of being image-bearers for many years, the Enlightenment forced the issue in a new way by calling the entire concept of image-bearing into question. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the discussion of humanity's place in the world is especially important. Graham Davidson explains that Coleridge's discussion of humanness is "the unifying force in Coleridge's intellectual development,"[1] and Anya Taylor describes humanness as "the subject that unites many of the topics that Coleridge explores."[2] Coleridge's concept of the person is foundational to his entire system of theology and philosophy and provides a common thread in his discussions of Faith, Reason, and the Will. His most developed writings on the subject are found in the *Opus Maximum* and in his personal notebooks; however bits and pieces of his anthropology can be found throughout his work. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" provides an early look at Coleridge's developing philosophy concerning humanness, and in this study, I use the *Opus Maximum* as my primary source for the details of Coleridge's work on humanness and the "Rime" as an example of Coleridge's model at work. As is often the case in Coleridge, ideas that are present in his earlier works show up in his later works in more detail. My goal is to illustrate that in both Coleridge's "Rime" and the *Opus Maximum* the foundation of humanness is the capacity to love.

As the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is a tale of damnation and salvation, the first task is to understand how the mariner is cursed and redeemed. The mariner's curse is brought about by his killing of the albatross, and his salvation is initiated by his learning to love the sea-snakes that had so revolted him: but what is the implication of being cursed or redeemed? For Coleridge, both are intimately tied to his understanding of humanness. Humans are only potentially not inherently endowed with humanness. According to Coleridge, true humanness is an ideal state that develops within the individual through natural and supernatural influences at all stages of life. In a sense, a human being can be more or less human, and the beginning of this process, as Coleridge describes in the *Opus*, begins in a mother's arms.

For Coleridge, the love between a mother and child is essential to the

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[1] Graham Davidson, *Coleridge's Career* (New York: St. Martins Press, Inc., 1990), 4.

[2] Anya Taylor, *Coleridge's Defense of the Human* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 5.

development of humanness within a child. In the *Opus Maximum*, he describes the birth of the first glimmer of human consciousness in a child. Through the connection of the mother's face with the warmth and security of feeding at the mother's breast, the child first begins to know itself. The excitement of a finer life is awoken in "a thousand tender kisses," and the baby's first language is "imitated from the mother's smiles."[3] It is in this tender moment that the child begins to develop as a person. Before the baby knows itself, "love begins; and the first love is love of to another."[4] Through this love a child finds its identity in the mother and "acknowledges a self in the mother's form years before it can recognize a self in its own."[5] As Coleridge describes in this passage, a child is not born as a conscious being. In a sense, it is purely animal at birth, yet through the loving embrace of the mother, the child becomes self-conscious.

Coleridge discusses the relationship between mother and child in highly philosophical terms in an effort to work out the implications of the relationship in his theological and philosophical system. Interestingly, later studies in early childhood development have affirmed Coleridge's assertion in this passage on a practical level.[6] As Silvia Bell describes, "the mother […] is *the* most important object in the environment of the young infant, and the one upon which he focuses first."[7] Mary Ainsworth writes:

> The baby cannot discriminate between things in his environment, nor between person and thing. Indeed he cannot even distinguish himself from his environment-which implies that he cannot discriminate between sensory input from his own body and sensory input from the external world. Because of this discriminative failure, the newborn is described as experiencing everything as part of himself.[8]

The similarities are striking. The baby is born without knowledge of itself or anything else. The child begins to identify various experiences surrounding him or her as being part of his or her identity, which supports Coleridge's discussion of the relationship between the mother and child. In a fascinating bit of marginalia on the *Book of Common Prayer*, Coleridge asserts that "Marriage, simply as marriage, is not the means 'for the procreation of children,' but for the humanization of the offspring procreated. Therefore in the Declaration at the beginning, after the word, 'procreation of children,' I would insert, 'and as

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3 *Op Max*, 121.

4 *Op Max*, 121.

5 *Op Max*, 121.

6 W. E. Donovan and L. A. Leavitt, "Early Cognitive Development and Its Relation to Maternal Physiologic and Behavioral Responsiveness," *Child Development* 49, no. 4 (1978): 1251.

7 Silvia M. Bell, "The Development of the Concept of Object as Related to Infant-Mother Attachment," *Child Development* 41, no. 2 (1970): 291-292.

8 Mary D. Salter Ainsworth, "Object Relations, Dependency, and Attachment: A Theoretical Review of the Infant-Mother Relationship," *Child Development* 40, no. 4 (1969): 973.

the means for securing to the children procreated enduring care &c."[9] It is interesting that even in his discussion of marriage, Coleridge sees the humanization of individuals as a primary goal.

As Coleridge describes the importance of the mother-child relationship during the early stages of the child's life, he makes it clear that the mother is not the only object that a child may emulate. In the absence of the mother, the child will find a substitute. One example, which Coleridge alludes to in the *Opus*, is the "Savage of Aveyron," a young boy, found in a French forest, that led had an animal-like life.[10] The boy had been "separated from others throughout his formative years" and having been raise by wolves "had lost the capacity to learn language."[11] Not only was the boy unable to speak, he was ultimately unable to learn how to speak. He had lost his ability to participate in the human experience. In a similar account from the twentieth century, a small girl was found in an attic in which she had lived, bound in solitude for her entire life. Her mother's second illegitimate child, she was seen as a disgrace to her mother's husband, who insisted that she be kept out of sight. She was deaf and most likely blind, and when she was found, she was entirely unresponsive to human contact. Even after several years, some thought that she was hardly recognizable as a human being.[12] The lack of human contact in these children's lives led them to become something other than human. In Coleridgean terms, the first child was imbruted, turned into an animal, and the second was bethinged, turned into a thing or inanimate object. In each case, the child was deprived of the necessary parental contact, and the result was a human form seemingly devoid of a human being.[13]

In the poem, the mariner forfeits his humanness in his senseless killing of the albatross. In effect, the mariner has become imbruted. The act of killing the albatross indicates the Mariner's fragmented humanness. This loveless act moves the Mariner into a world devoid of love and even the capacity to love. Whatever he had been before, he has further degraded whatever humanity he had. As the crew dies, and the albatross is hung around his neck, he is left without the capacity to love. Not only had he shown himself to be unloving, he was left without any object to love as he was "alone on a wide wide sea." This brings into focus another key idea in Coleridge's understanding of humanness—the necessity of the "other."

As is often the case in Coleridge's philosophy, the idea of the person depends on the polar relationship between subject and object. "For Coleridge," writes Karen McLean, "everything that has achieved actuality in some way

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[9] *Marginalia*, I, 704.

[10] John P. Foley, "The 'Baboon Boy' of South Africa," *The American Journal of Psychology* 53, no. 1 (1940): 128.

[11] *Op Max*, 120fn.

[12] Kingsley Davis, "Extreme Social Isolation of a Child," *The American Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 4 (1940).

[13] This poses a rather difficult ethical problem. Many inhuman acts have been justified throughout history by claiming that the victims were not human. Coleridge would certainly disdain any use of his work to justify anything along the lines of genocide or slavery.

must be in a relationship with something else."[14] This does not suggest that "unity has fallen apart or split" but that unity is best expressed through relationship. In the person, for example, the Self is the subject of the polar pair, and it must choose an object in which to find its identity. These objects can change as the individual develops, but an individual will always be subjected to some object. As Douglas Hedley points out, this is a common idea within the Platonic tradition, in which Coleridge stands in many respects. Plotinus held that "different souls look at different things and are and become what they look at." Similarly, Inge comments that "we are what we love and care about."[15] An individual will emulate any object to which he or she is subjected, and the proper object of the individual is Supreme Reason, the representative of the Will of God to the Individual.[16] As he writes in the *Opus*, "to the will of God the whole man is to be harmonized, alike in commission and omission, by subordination, or subjugation, or suppression,"[17] and the Will of God is communicated through Reason.

Reason, as McFarland points out, "is without doubt the most important single term in his entire arsenal of ideas."[18] Establishing the definition of Reason is one of the four aims of *Aids to Reflection*.[19] Reason, for Coleridge, is the "excellent Gift of God to mankind"[20] and "the representative of the Will of God" in the individual.[21] In the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge suggests that theologians have long attributed "whatever there is in man higher than the understanding to the Spirit," which he calls "the Omnipresent Spirit, the Supreme Reason, which is One with its Eternal Source, the Absolute Will of the Universe."[22] In an 1823 notebook entry he claims "that what the eldest Philosophy called Reason… and Ideas the philosophic Apostle [the Apostle John] names *the Spirit* and *Truths spiritually discerned*,"[23] and in *Aids to Reflection*, he identifies Jeremy Taylor's description of Reason with "what I have called Spirit."[24] Coleridge describes Reason as being "the Power of universal and necessary Conviction, the Source and Substance of Truths above Sense."[25] In these descriptions, Reason takes on divine properties, and Coleridge's continued emphasis on the essential unity of Reason further suggests a connection between Reason and the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. This is not so say that Reason is entirely synonymous with the Holy

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[14] Karen McLean, "Individuality, Unity, and Distinction: Plotinian Concepts in the *Opus Maximum*," in *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the Opus Maximum*, ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Dudley: Peeters, 2006), 250.

[15] Quoted in Douglas Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 160.

[16] *Op Max*, 84.

[17] *Op Max*, 93.

[18] McFarland, "Prolegomena," liii.

[19] *AR*, 8.

[20] *AR*, 421.

[21] *Op Max*, 84-85.

[22] *Op Max*, 160.

[23] *CN*, IV, 5089.

[24] *AR*, 340.

[25] *AR*, 216.

Spirit, but it seems that often the two represent the same power in different terms. Reason, for Coleridge, communicates the Will of God to the Individual, much as the Holy Spirit is said to communicate God's Will to individual Christians. If an individual can fully assent to Reason, he or she will emulate God. This relationship with God, the incorporation of Reason by the Will, is the crux of humanness for Coleridge.

Coleridge's model of human development has a significant impact on his view of sin, and a survey of his approach to this doctrine will help to clarify theological subtleties within the "Rime." In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge adapts a passage from Jeremy Taylor on the doctrine of Original Sin. According to Taylor, Adam's sin became a supernatural sickness within Adam. This sickness, which made him foolish, unreasonable, and weak, was then passed from generation to generation. Every child is born with this sickness, since Adam's sin made it the inheritance of all of humanity. Coleridge, with his emphasis on the importance of the individual will, found this idea untenable. For him, sin must have its origin in the Individual Will, and therefore it cannot be a disease passed from generation to generation. As he writes, "for if it be Sin, it must be *original*: and a State or Act, that has not its origin in the will, may be calamity, deformity, disease, or mischief; but a *Sin* it cannot be."[26] Therefore, Adam's sin may set a precedent for sin, but his sin does not infect subsequent generations with a sinful disease.

Despite the individuality of sin, Coleridge nonetheless writes that an individual becomes ensnared by sin at a very early age. The development of humanness begins in the relationship between mother and child, yet there comes "an awful moment in the life of Man." In this moment "the yearling babe is seated on its mother's knee. Full of love and life, shall they be directed to the objects of the senses, so selected as to solicit the attention and call forth eager desires…?"[27] Without stating as much, this difficult moment in the life of a child Coleridge seems to symbolize as the Fall. The child turns away from the mother and directs his or her attention to meaningless objects, just as Adam turned from God to the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Rather than turning toward God, the child seeks "the gaudy forms that attract its Eye, the delicious fruits which provoke its grasp."[28] In this allusion to the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Coleridge illustrates the way every individual turns away from his or her proper object and therefore becomes '[e]nslaved by imagination' and 'becomes the victim of those powers beyond self which he has alienated and estranged from their rightful objects.'[29]

Adam's will was entirely at one with Reason until the Fall, but since then, the level of each individual's incorporation of Reason varies. In a sense, every individual exists as a human being, simply to different degrees. True and total

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[26] *AR*, 271.
[27] *Op Max*, 123.
[28] *Op Max*, 123.
[29] *Op Max*, 123-4

humanness is a perfect union with Reason, a complete commitment to the Will of God, while total depravity is a complete rejection of divine Reason, a rejection of God. In a state of total depravity, true love does not exist, and prayer becomes impossible. However, Coleridge suggests that nothing can finally separate an individual from Reason. No matter how morally or intellectually decrepit an individual may be, his or her continued existence depends on some participation in Reason, and therefore everyone has the capacity to love to some degree, to turn again to the will of God.

Coleridge's Mariner provides an example of the rejection of Reason and consequent cessation of the ability to love; the reader witnesses the destruction and rebirth of humanness in the Mariner. One of the great mysteries of the "Rime" is the mariner's rationale behind shooting the albatross. Whatever his motive, his act is a symptom of an enslaved Will that is not co-ordinated with Reason but rather at the mercy of temporary impressions. As Daniel Hardy explains, without the union of the Will and Reason, "human apprehension remains cognitively and volitionally at lesser levels, and will be incapable of the higher levels of reason and love needed for wider spheres: the levels of instinct and judgment will fall short of Reason, and the levels of appetite and affection will fall short of the passion of Love."[30] Following the Mariner's loveless and unreasonable act, the wind stops; the crew dies; the albatross is bound around his neck, and he is left "alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide wide sea!"

During the week following the death of the crew, the Mariner is alone with the exception of the dreaded, slimy sea snakes, that the Mariner loathes. During his week of solitude, unable to pray or die, the mariner begins to observe, admire, and eventually love the sea snakes that surround the ship. His description of them changes at this point in the story. Initially he describes them as slimy, loathsome creatures, dancing about like death-fires beneath the boat:

> About, about, in reel and rout
> The death-fires danced at night;
> The water, like a witch's oils,
> Burnt green, and blue, and white.

In his second description his perspective has completely changed. The colors are the same in the two, but his perception of them is entirely different.

> They moved in tracks of shining white,
> And when they reared, the elfish light
> Fell off in hoary flakes.
>
> Within the shadow of the ship
> I watched their rich attire:

[30] Hardy, "Harmony and Mutual Implication in the *Opus Maximum*," 47.

> Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
> They coiled and swam; and every track
> Was a flash of golden fire.

Rather than loathing, the mariner had come to love the snakes. At the moment he realized his love, his tongue was loosed to pray. At that moment, love was reborn in him, and with it humanness.[31]

The importance of love is arguably one of Coleridge's central points within the "Rime." With his famous claim that "he prayeth best, who loveth best," Coleridge is asserting the primacy of love in the human experience. The turning point in the Mariner's story, the beginning of the Mariner's salvation, is brought about by learning to love the creatures that surrounded him as he drifted. The act of loving brought the Mariner back to the land of the living and, in Coleridgean terms, back to a state of humanness. The link between love and the development of humanness is apparent in both the "Rime" and Coleridge's later work. The capacity to love is at the very heart of Coleridge's understanding of the Image of God in humanity, and in this, he provides a challenge for us to develop in love and in humanness.

[31] Salvation is notably not an instantaneous even, but rather it is the process of developing toward true humanness. When the mariner comes to love the sea snakes, his salvation is just beginning. His journey home begins, and he continues to develop as a human for the rest of his life, which includes telling his story from time to time.