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Coleridge and Liberal Religious Thought: Romanticism, Science and Theological Tradition
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by
Graham Neville

ACCORDING TO HIS DAUGHTER SARA, the last afternoon of his life in 1834 Samuel Taylor Coleridge was still rehashing Trinitarian formulas, an enthusiasm at least two decades old. Among final words to an old friend, J. H. Green, he directed that "in whatever may be published of my posthumous works to remember that, first of all is the Absolute Good whose self-affirmation is the 'I am,' as the eternal reality in itself, and the ground and source of all other reality" (see Watson, *Coleridge at Highgate*, 1925, p. 158). This admonition was Christian testimony, not theoretical nitpicking. The nature of man's "I" and its dependence on not just the existence of God but God's active *presence* was imperative to him. That most quoted formulation in the *Biographia*, of Imagination as a "repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM," could only satisfy Coleridge with some deeper understanding of the mysterious nature of that "I Am." Throughout the 1820s Coleridge drew toward grounding God's being in Will—a verbal riddle, since an "I" is somehow precisely defined as *not* being an "it." Among his later formulations of the "I Am" name from Exodus was in 1826: the paradoxical "*I shall be that I will be* = my Will contains in itself the ground of my own Being" (CN IV 5413).

For those with ears, let them hear. One quick lesson from Coleridge's deathbed ruminations might be that his later writings do not repeat or even just succeed more famous earlier ones but may transform them. To those dedicated to literary but unenthusiastic about theological matters, overlooking the late Coleridge of Christian apologetics and the Gospel of John constitutes a mistake. A second lesson? What Coleridge thought were crucial questions in his own age might still be crucial in our own.

Graham Neville's *Coleridge and Liberal Religious Thought: Romanticism, Science and Theological Tradition* usefully reviews the poet's basic theology, with its central emphasis on wholeness and practicality—Christianity, he would insist, is not a theory but a *life*. Neville follows with an admittedly "narrowly focused historical study" (p. 161) of Coleridge's influence on the Victorian Church of England and Transcendentalist America. A priest, canon of Lincoln Cathedral, and teacher, Neville authored a number of books on Scripture and nineteenth-century religion before his death in 2008, including *Free Time: Toward a Theology of Leisure* (2004).

Perhaps the best known of the figures Neville studies is the theologian and Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice (1805-1872), who sympathized with the Oxford Movement but thought it too narrowly ecclesiastical. Though Maurice

was removed from professorships at King's College for heterodoxy, Coleridge's writings on Imagination and practical conscience helped him to apply Anglican faith to the many social problems in Dickens' England. He remained orthodox enough to have a chair at King's College named after him today. F. J. A. Hort (1828-1872) was primarily a Greek textual scholar and scientist, and Coleridge's own desire for a religiously grounded scientific method led him to some attempt at ideological diplomacy in an intellectual universe challenged by Charles Darwin. Hort argued that since truth could never undermine the Gospel, scientific method must be allowed to pursue its independent way, a familiar theological stance today but not then.

Influential thinker Thomas Erskine (1788-1870), an Anglican with much reliance on John Calvin, and Brighton's Holy Trinity Church preacher F. W. Robertson (1815-1863) were less directly Coleridgean. Neville calls them "fellow travelers" of the poet. Aspects of his views on Scripture, especially in the 1825 *Aids to Reflection* but also in the posthumously published *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840), influenced both as they wrestled with problems of authority in the Church and the vexed question of free will versus God's omnipotence. Key to Robertson's theology in his move away from a youthful Calvinism was a "conviction that dogmas become 'living facts' only when we recognize in them the particular expressions of 'eternal principles.'" This, Neville rightly asserts, was "a very 'Coleridgean' conviction" (p. 122).

Coleridge once commented that Calvinism is a sheep in wolf's skin—that is, "cruel in the phrases… but full of consolation for the individual," while the more apparently humanistic Arminianism is a wolf in sheep's skin, cruel beneath its civilized surface honoring reason and free will (p. 110). The distinction is striking. Significant too is Neville's tracing of American Transcendentalism to Puritan roots and his exploration of how a Ralph Waldo Emerson could honor Coleridge genuinely but also exit Christian belief by rejecting doctrines that the poet himself had considered indispensable.

Neville never quite defines the word "liberal" in his title, but it appears to have the general connotation of liberation from outdated ties to authoritarian tradition and a willingness to explore even threatening new ideas in an evolving world. By today's standards, the writers surveyed may sound rather traditional, tied to a belief in the truth, though not literally dictated, of the Bible, and fairly conventional Anglican applications of it to the social role of the Church. The aspect of Coleridge which made him an influential political *conservative* in the tradition of Edmund Burke fits awkwardly with the announced thrust of the book's title. Glimpses may be seen of the dimension of Coleridge's thought that historian Paul Johnson's 1991 *The Birth of the Modern* (see p. 828) praised as an important defense of the individual soul from the increasing demands of the state. Nonetheless, Neville ignores Coleridge's Tory political heritage throughout. Yet surely *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1830) is nothing like an endorsement of socialism in England.

Toward the end Neville pays some attention to questions about evolution and the Bible and makes a cursory critique of the vices of a free market system.

But current controversies such as women as bishops and blessings of gay relationships, or the authority of Canterbury in a global church, do not appear. Neither do such names as Rowan Williams or N. T. Wright. The argument is firmly located in the age of Victoria. Certainly, for all of the writers surveyed, Christ is physically risen, miracles take place, and God is an ultimate reality, not a useful fiction.

This historical focus within one ecclesiastical context is pragmatic. Still, Neville offers a haunting item of Coleridgean marginalia: "The difference between a great mind's and a little mind's Use of History—The Latter would consider, for instance, what Luther did, taught, or sanctioned: the former, what Luther, *a* Luther, would now do, teach, or sanction" (p. 145). Like so many Coleridgean insights, this one sounds right. Could one wish for an exploration of Coleridge that tracks him in the Christian Church generally and makes him relevant to the present day, in which this core set of Victorian beliefs seems outdated to many? The poet himself was off and on emphatically anti-Roman Catholic. There were political reasons, not least those involving Ireland, for the acerbity, as well as historical and cultural ones. But he was still recorded shortly before his death as saying that if younger he would make an effort to reach a greater entente with that ancient British foe and scarecrow (see Ashton's *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1996, p. 376). Is John Henry Newman really so cardboard a figure in the next era as to deserve only the few mentions Neville gives him, in each case to record how easily a Maurice or Hort could dismiss Newman's authoritarianism and controversialist overstatement? To one like me outside this world of Anglican dispute, the book's restricted focus feels insular.

In his *Atheist Delusions* (2009), a fine Orthodox historian of Christianity, David B. Hart, fears catastrophic consequences as the world loses sight of its Christian underpinnings. Can a post-Christian world, including England, continue to take for granted all that is implied by the assurance that an "I" is not an "it"? What if the human "I" becomes in reality and not just academic theory a noble fiction or an empty boast? One need not feel doomed, but Hart has his reasons. What *would* a Coleridge "do, teach, or sanction" in a modern British or American world?

Yet while *Coleridge and Liberal Religious Thought* does not seek such direct contemporary relevance, Neville's study gives some strong evidence of Coleridge's legacy—a healthy one—to later ages. On one page of an 1868 multi-volume edition of Coleridge's collected works, edited by W. G. T. Shedd, which I own, some American reader long ago penciled between entries in *Table Talk* conveying the poet's disgust with Dissenters, "I think that this man Coleridge would have persecuted for Christ's sake, if he had had the power." The comment is understandable but also wrong. For all of the polemics against religious adversaries found in Coleridge's notes and recorded conversation, Neville's historical analysis suggests why.