Church and State

Seamus Perry

I WAS TAUGHT COLERIDGE AT THE KNEE OF JONATHAN WORDSWORTH: his knowledge was very wide, but it would not be unfair to say that the Coleridge who mattered most to Jonathan was the Coleridge who mattered most to his illustrious predecessor. This was the Coleridge of 'The Ancient Mariner' and the conversation poems; the friend who, by his effective commission, launched Wordsworth on a long and extraordinarily productive poetic career spent not writing *The Recluse*; and the advocate of a religion in which natural loveliness and spiritual epiphany were intertwined in a way which managed to sidestep most of the shortcomings of Christianity while retaining a reverence for Jesus. This was also, importantly, the person who delivered radical lectures in Bristol in 1795 in which the progress of the imagination and the progress of society were somehow cast as aspects of the same master-narrative of necessary ascent: these Coleridgean politics, a sort of spiritualised egalitarianism, were what counted in Jonathan's classes and lectures, and about which he spoke with all his erudition and trenchancy. So it was with a strong sense of encountering quite a different Coleridge that, a year or two later, I read *On the Constitution of the Church and State* in the Everyman edition by John Barrell, discovered by chance in the second hand department of Blackwell's. I can't exactly say that life was never the same again; but the book remained part of my mental furniture, and I re-read it the other day with renewed interest: its currency within modern debates might seem pretty exiguous at first sight, but it is a striking piece of political imagination and you can see why so many young Victorian intellectuals thought it a major contribution.

The book was first conceived as a response to the prospect of Catholic emancipation, a measure which Coleridge supported while wishing to ensure that the institutions of the nation were robust enough to sustain themselves. The amount of the book actually dedicated to the measures that he thought necessary to achieve this end turns out to be pretty small: the work is characteristically Coleridgean in that establishing the fundamental grounds for an opinion turns out to be much more absorbing than the articulation of the opinion itself; and, anyway, by the time the book appeared the Emancipation Bill had gone through parliament so the timeliness of his advice was no longer an issue. Coleridge begins on an impressively counter-empirical note: his definitions of Church and State are not going to be deduced from any institutions that might have happened to exist at some point, he says, but rather based upon the 'idea' which they embody, their '*ultimate aim*'.

The 'State' turns out to be two ideas: the larger sense of the term is the totality of the nation, encompassing all its various component parts including the Church; but in its more restricted sense the State is in opposition to the Church, comprising the political institutions that make up the constitution of the nation. What is the 'ultimate aim' of the state in the large sense, then? The answer is a piece of conservatism at its most beguiling for the state turns out to

be rather like a Coleridgean poem, balancing and reconciling opposite and discordant qualities. Those qualities are, on the one hand, Permanence, and, on the other, Progression, perpetual antagonists which Coleridge saw happily brought into a kind of balance in Britain by the configuration of the Houses of Parliament: the impulse for change represented by the mercantile and professional interests within the Commons was fruitfully countered by the landed interest represented in the Lords, the natural ambition of which was to keep things much as they are. Pinning his 'idea' to the arrangements of the unreformed Parliament like that makes him sound 'conservative' in rather a stodgy way; but the underlying vision is more encompassing and has a good deal in common with Burke, for whom meaningful political change always involved a play between a principle of innovation and a no less principled resistance to innovation—what Coleridge calls 'the two great correspondent, at once supporting and counterpoising, interests of the state'.

True political change, in this vision, is not the imposition of some unprecedented novelty from without, such as the abstractions of political theory that Burke saw ruinously at work in the French Revolution, but rather the realisation of potentialities that had always existed within the 'idea' of the state. The state possesses what Coleridge calls 'a self-evolving Constitution', something for which he thought he had found evidence in the fact that Englishmen tended to think of any desired or newly acquired powers or privileges as their 'antecedent right … what had always belonged to them, though withheld by violence and the injury of the times'. It is a very striking, and indeed poetical, notion of history: the imperfect political arrangements that actually happen to exist at any point are always haunted by the unrealised 'idea' of the 'State' to which they continually aspire.

Coleridge's other main business in the book is the 'state' in its more limited sense and its relationship with the national church. As well as the property owned by private interests, says Coleridge, every nation has reserved some property for itself, the wealth of which is meant to serve a key public purpose: namely, to pay for 'a permanent class or order' which would serve to enlighten the people, 'to preserve the stores, to guard the treasures, of past civilization, and thus to being the present with the past; to perfect and add to the same, and thus to connect the present with the future', a body of educators that he called the 'clerisy' or 'national church'. A good deal of its work is discharged by ministers or affiliates of the Church, but the 'clerisy' in Coleridge's sense is not simply to be equated with the clergy of the Church of England: it encompasses, as well, educators more generally, from tutors and professors at the universities to schoolmasters in the towns and villages; and the fact that it is Christianity which generally informs their efforts is, in one of Coleridge's more audacious phrases, merely 'a blessed accident' – or, as he says in a footnote, 'a God-send!'. The whole purpose of the 'clerisy' is to create the conditions within which the countering interests of permanence and progress that comprise the big 'State' can work out their rightful historical destiny, at once 'continuing and progressive': in other words, the politics simply aren't

going to work as they should unless people possess the right sort of mind – that is 'the necessary antecedent condition'. Of course, Coleridge thinks Christianity is especially good at the task; but the happy contingency of its being the faith to hand in Britain is quite irrelevant to the 'idea' of the state: that depends, rather, upon a state of mind – one which he calls '*cultivation*', 'the harmonious developement of those qualities and faculties that characterise our *humanity*'.

I remember the late Tom McFarland telling me that anyone who thought the Imagination-Fancy distinction was what mattered was no true Coleridgean. My face must have betrayed a guilty surprise at this information as he kindly went on to explain that what *really* mattered was the Reason—Understanding distinction; and certainly, Coleridge implies as much in *Church and State*, which has nothing substantial to say about imagination. 'Until you have mastered the fundamental difference, in kind, between the reason and the understanding as faculties of the human mind, you cannot escape a thousand difficulties in philosophy', Coleridge is recorded saying in *Table Talk*: understanding was only capable of forming 'a mere conclusion generalized from a great number of facts', but Reason, in Coleridge's elevated sense of the word, was a spiritual faculty able to discern 'eternal truth'. Understanding was a normal part of humdrum mental life, but Reason an 'other and higher gift': understanding was associated with mere 'talent'—Reason with 'genius'.

The work of the clerisy is effectively to nurture Reason among the people, a job description which may sound pretty uncontestable but it is drawn up in particular circumstances: Coleridge considered himself to be living in an England in which Understanding had seized the upper hand—a country in which, while it busied itself with its 'Inventions, Discoveries, Public Improvements, Docks, Rail-ways, Canals, &c.', its benighted people lived in 'the dynasty of the understanding', a kingdom of 'medial ends' and not the '*ultimate* ends' that are truly the stuff of an 'idea'. (So Coleridge's method in the book, beginning with ideas, itself exemplifies the different way that one might go about things.) The language of ends is unmistakably his own, but he anticipates the writings of Arnold and Ruskin and Carlyle and the other great social commentators of Victorian England in depicting a land with the wrong mental faculties in control—and this most influential part of his argument could still, perhaps, claim a hearing in modern political discussion.

England was a place, thought Coleridge, where minds are distorted by Locke, Paley, Pope: as John Barrell said in his excellent introduction, Coleridge basically thought the place had been on the slide since the seventeenth century and frequently lamented the obscuring of 'spiritual platonic old England' by the philistine material enterprise of 'commercial G[reat] Britain'. A nation has a 'character & genius' that is not to be confounded with 'the conflux of its Individuals in *Cities* & *Reviews*', he wrote in the notebook, trying to persuade himself; but the final effect of his political reflections in *Church and State* is rather less sure that the 'idea' *will* prevail over what individuals actually choose to do. His manner is much more inclined to metaphysics than Burke's, but

Coleridge shares with him a particular kind of conservative pathos: each in their way appeals to 'the idea of a state … a *principle*, existing in the only way in which a principle can exist—in the minds and consciences of the persons, whose duties it prescribes, and whose rights it determines'. But such an appeal is only required once the sense of any such idea or principle has already been weakened and is perhaps already beyond repair. Coleridge brings his book to a close with a return to the Reason which, properly cultivated by his busy and widespread clerisy, would work towards the state's ever fuller realisation of the idea of itself:

> Whene'er the mist, that stands 'twixt God and thee,
> Defecates to a pure transparency,
> That intercepts no light and adds no stain—
> There Reason is, and then begins her reign!

A stirring conclusion breathing a certain spiritual confidence, but one which is at once undermined: 'But, alas!' Coleridge writes, and then quotes from the *Paradiso*: 'With false imagination thou thyself / Mak'st dull, so that thou see'st not the thing / Which thou had'st seen, had that been shaken off' (in Cary's translation). Conservative political writing from Burke to Roger Scruton often has this rather elegiac quality. Coleridge's vision seems hard-wired into the structure of the moral universe, the rightness of the constitution encapsulated within the Rational sovereignty of an 'idea' in all its magnificent self-dependence; but meantime the ideas remain lost in mist, strangely vulnerable to 'the violence and injury of the times', and Reason's reign seems as far off as ever.

STC at 42
Samuel Cousins (1801-1887), after Washington Allston, 1814; mezzotint; (17 x 13 in.)
Published for George T. Barnard, 1854