William A. Ulmer

reads

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Anglican Church

(South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010)

by Luke S. H. Wright

AS ITS TITLE INDICATES, Luke's Wright's book addresses Coleridge's relationship with the Anglican Church. The book reconstructs Coleridge's engagement with Anglicanism principally by tracing the development of his views on the proper relationship of church and state. Wright argues in fact that the organizing venture of Coleridge's intellectual career, his "Mature Project," was the formulation of a conservative theological polity, and he devotes the third and longest of his book's four parts to describing the evolution of that project from *The Friend* to the *Confessions of an Enquiring Spirit*. The first part of the book concerns "Coleridge as A Young Man," the second part consists of a brief, transitional "Landing-Place," and the fourth and final part, entitled "The Soul of Toryism," explores Coleridge's influence on certain Victorian church-and-state theorists. As Wright remarks, his book originated as a study of Coleridge's recourse to Richard Hooker to counter the well-established church-and-state contract theory of William Warburton, and acquired its broader focus only as he realized that Coleridge's interest in Hooker was "an integral part of a greater project" (3).

The first part of the book sketches "Coleridge's Political Milieu" and "Coleridge's Religious Milieu" in chapters one and two. Wright's sense of the political situation faced by the young Coleridge involves not so much Godwin, Pitt, and the French Revolution as the ideological partnership of Warburton and the eighteenth-century Whig establishment, for that partnership presupposed a contract theory of government which happened to valorize and protect the rights of private property—and that is the context, Wright suggests, in which Coleridge's early Pantisocratic theory must be understood. However radical a scheme Pantisocracy must appear due its abolition of private property, Wright cautions that it retained important conservative elements in its implicit use of Hooker to contest Warburton. "When it came to church and state," Wright declares, "Coleridge was a Tory" (29), with a latent Toryism emerging in his thought early on. This same conservatism appears in Wright's description of Coleridge's Unitarianism in chapter two. For Wright, Coleridge's Unitarianism represents "a substantially conservative Biblicist position" and, as such, "must not be confused with the later rational and pantheistic tradition of Unitarianism that would grow out of the earlier tradition around 1820" (44, 45). Wright further supports his claims for the significant conservatism of Coleridge's Unitarianism in several interesting ways: by dismissing the common opinion that Jesus College was a hotbed of political and theological radicalism (48), by challenging the notion of Coleridge's close relationship to the Unitarian Church during his *Watchman* days (51), and by reading the *Lectures on Revealed Religion* as "Coleridge's Mythical Book of Pantisocracy" (chapter 3). To

justify this approach to the *Lectures*, Wright's argues that "the subjects of the ethics of property and inequality appear continually from their introduction through the discussion in lecture 3" and are therefore "the real crux of the work's theology" (61). The second major part of the study, the "Landing-Place," follows with its claim that nothing occurring between *The Watchman* and *The Friend* (1809) helped shape Coleridge's ideas about the proper relationship of church and state. Chapter 4 takes up the questions of Warburton's and Coleridge's readings of Hooker. Here Wright attempts to date Coleridge's reading of Hooker from the annotations in Coleridge's copy (and ends up suggesting that the young Coleridge borrowed without returning the copy of Hooker in the Old Library of Jesus College, Cambridge during his days as college junior librarian). This review of the evidence helps move his argument to part three by establishing both Coleridge's early familiarity with Hooker and his close reading of *The Laws* twice during the 1820s.

The book's third section begins with *The Friend*. For Wright, "*The Friend* is the first of Coleridge's works that can be placed within the canon of his mature religious thought," "the first to reveal Hooker as a constructive influence and the first in his [Coleridge's] career as an apologist for the religious establishment" (107). This section attends to the relationship of church and state by stressing the inextricable nexus of religion and politics in Coleridge's thought. Wright criticizes Deidre Coleman's account of this "Gordian Knot" for her inability to see that the two poles of Coleridge's thinking achieve dialectical unity based on Hooker: indeed the latter part of the chapter attempts to demonstrate that Coleridge's concept of reason in *The Friend* comes principally from Hooker and only secondarily from German idealism (114, 118-19). Here Wright concludes by arguing that in *The Friend* Coleridge insists ultimately upon "a theologically grounded (Tory) polity" (129). Turning next to *The Lay Sermons*, Wright shows how Coleridge's views of education also belonged to a longstanding conservative tradition, with education viewed as the means for the establishment in England of a biblical commonwealth, and responsibility for educating the nation ceded to the Church of England. With *Aids to Reflection*, the subject of Chapter 7, Wright differentiates himself from previous commentators by arguing "that there are two distinct projects within the work": the analyses of Schelling and neo-Platonism executed by Coleridge and the "primer" section of aphorisms taken (mostly) from Archbishop Leighton. In Wright's opinion, critics who fail to note this distinction, and who thereby demote the text's counterbalancing primer, typically produce misreadings in which the "Anglican elements of *Aids to Reflection* are swallowed up by the idealist project . . . that brackets the primer" (150-51). Chapter 8 is entitled "On the Divine Ideas" because that is Wright's preferred title for the *Opus Maximum*. Coleridge scholarship is of course still trying to make sense of this text and Wright's chapter makes an important contribution to that effort. Wright views fragment 4 of *Opus Maximum* as an early, unsuccessful redaction of leading ideas, and gives it comparatively little attention. He then argues that

the remaining fragments should be read in the order 3, 1, 2—a claim involving vexed issues of dating—and that, if so read, the fragments yield a coherent systematic theology. More specifically, he believes that "the system presents Christianity as a philosophy, and Trinitarian Christianity founded on the concept of Absolute Will as the one possible 'True Philosophy' " (162). Wright differentiates Coleridge's position from Schelling and Schopenhauer and provides exegetical commentaries on all 16 of Coleridge's chapters designed to demonstrate their mutual coherence as elements of a unified theory. In chapter 9, Wright reads *On the Constitution of Church and State* as the "text in which Coleridge most explicitly used Hooker to reconstruct a Tory position on church and state in reaction to Warburton" (185). Here Coleridge's educational interests resurface in the role famously accorded the clerisy. In *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (chapter 10) Coleridge presents a pneumatological tract addressing the role of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's reading of the Bible. Wright elucidates Coleridge's Pentad as a reading model and notes how his support of the Anglican establishment prompts his opposition to the literalism and self-sufficiency of Protestant Bibliotry. The fourth and final part of the book presents Coleridge's influence on such later church-and-state theorists as Keble and Gladstone; so the argument concludes by placing "Coleridge in a Tory Historical Context."

As this outline of Wright's argument should suggest, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Anglican Church* is a wide-ranging, intellectually searching contribution to Coleridge studies, and an important text for anyone working on Coleridge's politics, theology, or intellectual development—or even, at moments, his biography. At the same time, the pivotal role Wright accords ecclesiological theory in Coleridge's thinking comes at a cost. Despite various glances at Coleridge's radicalism and heterodoxy, Wright seems to me occasionally to overstate both Coleridge's conservatism and the evolving unity of his philosophical outlook; and for that matter I remain unconvinced that the criterion of church-and-state theory is in itself sufficient to gauge Coleridge's complex and changing attitudes to Anglicanism. But as a literary historian whose interest in Coleridge has focused principally on the poetry, I have two complaints in particular. The first concerns Wright's recurrent inattentiveness to literary scholarship on Coleridge, including both studies of Coleridge's intellectual prose and critical studies of topics which plainly bear on Wright's project. Many of the texts I expected to see cited in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Anglican Churc*h do appear in its Bibliography. Yet it seemed odd that, a Bibliographic citation aside, Wright's book should not otherwise notice Robert Barth's respected *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, particularly in light of Barth's demonstration that many of Coleridge's mature doctrinal positions veered slightly from Anglican orthodoxy. Readers may ask themselves if, given the promise of Wright's title, they would not similarly expect at least passing citation and discussion (there is none) of Barfield, Bate, Beer, Orsini, Paley, Piper, Prickett, Sanders, Wylie, and others in the body of the book.

No doubt part of the reason that literary scholarship often goes unnoticed by Wright speaks to my second, related complaint: his decision to ignore Coleridge's poetry. He declares that the poems "are simply not relevant. This might not have been the case were the poems written about theological or political themes and issues, but they are not. … Coleridge's poetry is profoundly untheological and apolitical" (4). This statement is patently false, and in ways that clearly alter the terms of the argument. It is far easier to claim that Coleridge's Unitarianism must be differentiated from "the later rational and pantheistic tradition of Unitarianism," for instance, if one doesn't have to account for the depiction of God as "Nature's vast ever-acting energy! / In will, in deed, Impulse of All to all" in "Preternatural Agency." Most readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin* will know that Coleridge explores both his religious and political convictions in poems ranging from *Religious Musings* to the conversation poems and beyond; these texts form an important evidentiary record of his thinking, especially if read in the context of the works on which they depend. Reading of that sort might demonstrate, for example, that Coleridge's Unitarianism relied on Priestley in some ways just as much as it did the Bible, and that realization would complicate in turn any effort to interpret Coleridge's Unitarianism as a displaced and residually conservative expression of his Pantisocratic notions. For reasons such as this, I often found myself unconvinced by Wright's arguments even as I admired his learning and valued his insights. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Anglican Church* is certainly a welcome addition to Coleridge studies, a book that Coleridge critics will read with great interest and eagerly use for their own work on Coleridge. It is a book that would have proven easier to use, however, if at times it were more thoroughly grounded in available Coleridge criticism.