Confessions of an Inquiring Pantheist

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COLERIDGE FIRST CAME INTO MY LIFE when I was around eleven years old, ill in bed at boarding school. I was gripped by an illustration of lines from the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' with its caption beneath it:

> Like one that on a lonesome road
> Doth walk in fear and dread
> And having once looked round walks on
> And no more turns his head
> Because he knows a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread.

I remember this illustration in isolation, unconnected with the Rime as a whole. Although it is almost certainly not the (unidentified) illustration reproduced above, the art was similar in style, and — most importantly — the complete stanza was printed beneath it as a caption in just the same way. The captioned lines haunted me more than the picture: they brought back memories of childhood terrors at home when, if I needed to pee during the night, I had to leave my bedroom and walk fearfully alone down a long flight of stairs in the darkness. The fear of foul fiends came back to me and was so well represented by these lines that to form some protection I sketched a Cross in pencil on the back of my cricket scoring book. Although I only remember the illustration, this is surely a sign that I had read and was infected by the Rime's tale of unwitting guilt and lifelong penance. I can see now the pencil

shading that I laboriously filled inside the outlines of the cross on that dark green cardboard-backed cover. This improvised talisman was kept secret — such weaknesses had to be hidden — I hoped anyone else seeing it would assume that this thick cross within a rectangle was a drawing of a flag. But alone in my sickroom I propped it upright, focused on it, and thought seriously about how prayer might keep such things at bay.

The invitation to contribute something short and informal in celebration of Coleridge's two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary year has stirred up memories like this first acquaintance with Coleridge. Subjective reverberations normally get filtered out of scholarly presentations. But when Graham Davidson invited me to imagine myself in a pub, or at a dinner party, explaining to an intelligent companion what Coleridge means to me, the unsung subjective side begged for expression. I choose for my imaginary setting a Coleridge Summer Conference at Cannington: a balmy summer night in the first decade of the twenty-first century. We have returned from the village pub, the Rose and Crown, and the handful of us who want to keep going gather round a wooden table on the terrace in the middle of the campus outside the closed student bar. Find a corkscrew, open a fresh bottle of wine, and speak from the heart. Welcome to the true conference: the conference within the conference.

Moving forward from this earliest memory of Coleridge, I know that I read selected poems of Coleridge and Wordsworth as a set book for English Literature but I remember nothing about studying, exams and classrooms: I just remember superimposing 'Tintern Abbey' on the lawns, lakes, woods, and pagan temples of my school's Arcadian grounds, and reciting it to myself transported by its most mystical passages. The lines "something far more deeply interfused, | Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns" lifted me into some dimension beyond life — one not remotely hinted at or evoked in the school's compulsory religious observances. "Cutting" chapel was a serious offence, but I was developing a counter-religion, and once I realised that no one could take a roll-call on Sundays because chapel seating changed to accommodate visiting parents, I started skipping the Sunday service. I so enjoyed peeking from my study window at the schoolmasters who, as the last to file in, assembled outside the chapel in their bright MA Oxon Cantab gowns. Once everyone had disappeared inside the chapel doors I was free to wander down to our illicit smoker's hideout: a secluded crater in scrubland bordering the lakes, where I could smoke, and see into the life of things.

This is how Wordsworth and Coleridge — still to me an inseparable and complementary pair — became important reference points in my early life. Coleridgean intimations of spiritual danger, and Wordsworthian visionary rapture, entwined around my uneasy relationship with a formal public school Christian religion that seemed so at odds with the teachings of its Founder.

In the counter-cultural late 1960s that followed, my generation had our equivalent of the French Revolution. Millenarian hopes were raised of a new dawn for humanity. We argued between ourselves over whether this was a revolution in the head or in the streets. Psychedelic drugs allowed us to

experience visionary states that confirmed all the wisdom of the ancients east and west. Browsing through the illustrations of my *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* felt like looking through the family photograph album. Underground magazines and the new music we shared made us feel united like a tribe. We were an unstoppable generational force. Or so we felt. The dream did not last and then started the true work of making sense of what had happened: evaluating where it went wrong and how to take what we had learned and build from there. How could it have been possible not to compare this with the experience of Coleridge and Wordsworth as they dealt with the disappointing outcome of the French Revolution that had promised so much? Their millenarian hope was surely centred on the One Life vision. And while Wordsworth made the loss of this vision the subject of his finest mature poetry, Coleridge's developing philosophy that analysed the different demands of faith and reason grew in importance for me.

I learned from the drug culture the value of the visionary state — and I still believe that the experience of unity with the Divine, of the oneness of all Life, is the foundation of all religious traditions before they become corrupted or diluted by the passing of time. I also saw that the experience did not last, that psychedelic drugs had to be used wisely. This led me to practise Transcendental Meditation (TM) as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. His was a very liberal teaching: the transcendental experience was our human birthright and he offered a technique to get there naturally. Without following any rules we would in time evolve into a higher state of consciousness, where we would naturally feel full of the divine spirit and full of love for all humanity. World peace would surely follow if enough people practised it. Although this was not a religion or system of beliefs inevitably we formed a group and took on a particular identity based on our belief that TM (our particular meditation and not that of rival teachers) was *the* answer. Jane (my wife) and I went on long residential training courses to speed up our progress, and we became teachers of it.

Now we were representatives of the organisation, we felt bound by loyalty and the pressure to maintain an appropriate façade: we had to keep private any reservations about the increasingly grandiose claims for its benefits that we were expected to make. So when, to our delight, Jane became pregnant, and I needed to get a real 9–5 office job, we bought a house and decided to take a break from teaching TM. Once we stepped back from our involvement we realised how much we relished the freedom. We tried to continue with our twice daily meditation practice, but by then this had grown to include various additional routines and exercises that took up over an hour twice a day. After our daughter was born, we tried to do this in shifts. It proved impossible. Thus we settled into our new life, and while we continue to this day to value the practice of meditation, we detached ourselves from the TM organisation and decided to shed all this baggage and live as normal people. If I hadn't told you all this, I wouldn't be able to explain what I sought from Coleridge.

In this new life I did my best to press the reset button and start again. I

remembered the poetry of Wordsworth in particular. This visionary state that he captured so well had no religious baggage with it; it was simply a pure experience. It's not that I was anti-religion, my problem was more that I had engaged with too many religions to believe that any single one had the exclusive truth. This might be called the esotericist approach to religion: born of the sense that there is some inner essence that is common to all religions. I admire the motto of the nineteenth-century Theosophical Society: "There is no religion higher than truth". But every religious reformer (theosophists included) who tries to proclaim a non-sectarian universalism, creates yet another sect. If you view institutionalised religion as the man-made tower that aspires to reach heaven, the Genesis tale of the Tower of Babel tells a dark truth.

This is where Coleridge comes in to the picture. Whereas for me Wordsworth was a case of either having a visionary experience or losing it and surviving stoically without it, Coleridge studied the mechanics of this in a way that I found increasingly helpful. My first ambition when I got seriously involved in studying Coleridge was to trace how he arrived at the 'One Life' vision that seemed so close to the transcendental experiences I had glimpsed and aspired to cultivate. I read in a bibliography of my edition of the *Upanishads* that Sir William Jones had published a translation of the *Isa Upanishad* in 1799 and this date — within one year of *Lyrical Ballads* — seemed to me both a sign that western culture was opening to this new vision, and also a near miss because if Coleridge been open to these ideas his One Life experiences could have acquired the cultural support that Christianity as he understood it evidently didn't provide. Hence my fascination with 'The Eolian Harp' (CB17 Summer 2001, 1-26), which dramatized the tension between the poet's visionary experience and the Christian reproof from Sara, who condemns this as "vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring" and charges Coleridge to "walk humbly with my God". 'The Eolian Harp' is in many ways the least of Coleridge's achievements but it was first written when he was only twenty-three and dramatizes a split that lies at the heart of everything he continued to work on philosophically. The question I wished to ask Coleridge was: what's so terrible about pantheism? Why can't such a self-evidently redemptive spiritual experience co-exist with Christianity properly understood? Coleridge's life's work, after all, was to establish Christianity as a "spiritual religion" that would be supported by a transcendental philosophy.

Thus I turn to the conclusion to *Aids to Reflection* where Coleridge near the end of his life sets out his definitive condemnation of pantheism:

> But many do I know, and yearly meet with, in whom a false and sickly taste co-operates with the prevailing fashion: many who find the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, far too real, too substantial; who feel it more in harmony with their indefinite sensations
>
> > To worship Nature in the hill and valley,
> > Not knowing what they love:—

> and (to use the language, but not the sense or purpose of the great poet of our age) would fain substitute for the Jehovah of their Bible
>
> A sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air;
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things!
> ('Tintern Abbey'; Wordsworth).
>
> And this from having been educated to understand the Divine Omnipresence in any sense rather than the alone safe and legitimate one, the presence of all things to God!

Oh Coleridge! You who are the visionary seer of dynamic polar philosophy; you who recognise that "extremes meet"; How can you descend to this? Disowning Wordsworth's great lines while exculpating him with weasel words that seek to disconnect the "language" of his lines from his "sense or purpose". *Aids to Reflection* was written with a specific aim. Coleridge was marshalling the sayings of seventeenth-century Divines to present a work of apologetics for Anglican Protestantism and its thirty-nine Articles. While Coleridge was liberal and insightful as regards the respective claims of reason and faith, his insistence on so-called Revealed Religion kept at bay the fuller liberalisation: namely, acceptance that a living God could offer direct revelation in the here and now.

In a recent article on Coleridge and Owen Barfield (CB 57, Summer 2021) I quoted Alan Watts explaining that the Vedanta doctrine of non-dualism or ultimate unity of the divine does not preclude engagement in I–Thou worship with the Deity. Our spiritual life need not be expressed in fixities or be tied to either/or — there should be room for movement between, and co-existence of, different positions. This matters to me as regards Coleridge because he has also expressed metaphysical positions with which I agree. It is easy enough to discount an author with whom you disagree, but if that author has also provided insights with which you agree profoundly, you *engage*! My ties to Coleridge are all the tighter as a result of this need to tease out his inner contradictions. "Until you understand a writer's ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding" goes the Coleridgean dictum. Let me try.

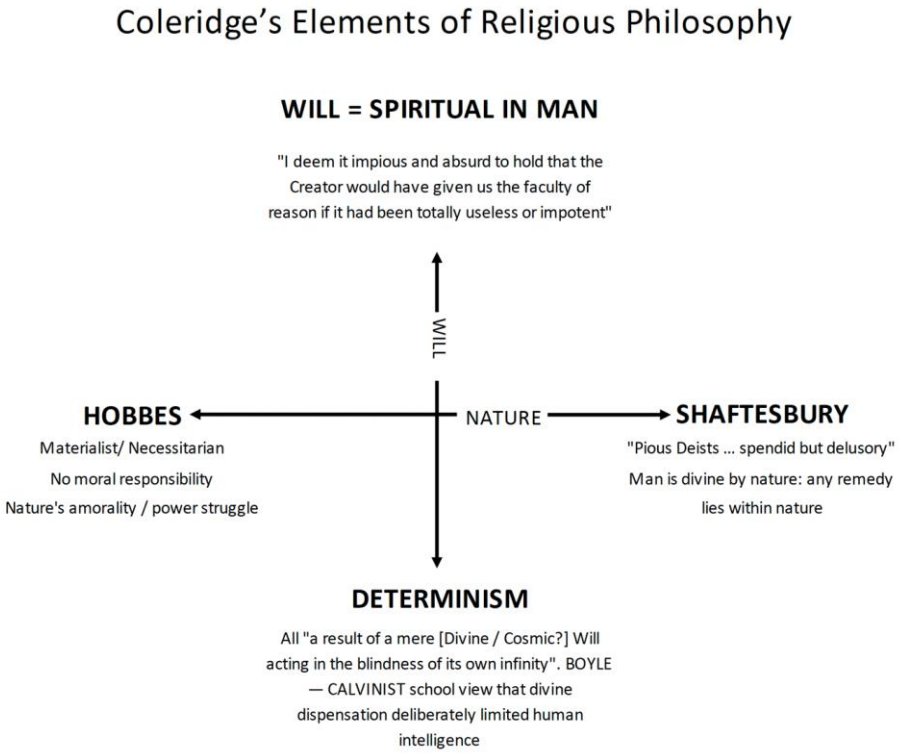
In 1817, long after he professed to be on the side of Christian Sara, Coleridge added the One Life lines to his revised 'The Eolian Harp':

> O! the one Life, within us and abroad,
> Which meets all Motion, and becomes its soul,
> A Light in Sound, a sound-like power in Light,
> Rhythm in all Thought, and Joyance every where—

This insertion, regardless of whether the words had been freshly written in

1817 or retained from an earlier time, shows a concurrent adherence to this visionary One Life experience, and a supremely successful expression of it. He doesn't drop the other side of the question: he keeps the "Meek daughter in the family of Christ!" in oppositional balance. This capacity to allow different positions to co-exist (such co-existence is *demanded* by Coleridge's polar philosophy of prothesis, thesis, antithesis) is Coleridge at his best. This is the Coleridge that still speaks to all ages and those of all religious affiliations or none.

In 1824, only a year before the publication of *Aids to Reflection*, he jotted in a notebook "*The Oracle*—mist, and intoxicating vapor—yet an Oracle & truly. *Mem. mem. mem.* O π μ [O p m]" (CN IV 5111). I am not including this secret note to catch him out in inconsistency or take a dig at a lapse into drug taking: I view this note as a recognition he still valued the visionary experience (by any means) and that this needed to be recorded and thrice-remembered ("*Mem. mem. mem.*"). This recognition co-exists with Coleridge's other public professions on religious matters. Coleridge at his best had a capacity to map the whole territory in a way that suggests a greater whole. Coleridge's delineation in *Aids to Reflection* of the different possible philosophical positions: the "Elements of Religious Philosophy" can be set out in the form of a diagram, as I have attempted to show below.



I would amend Coleridge's schema here by adding "Grace" to the Shaftesbury "man is divine by nature" position on the right-hand point of the cross. I contend (as Coleridge seems not to) that the visionary experience that Coleridge elsewhere celebrates is a grace and not the result of human effort alone. Grace vs Will — the old argument between Calvinists and Arminians — is not allowed for on this map, and as a result the Calvinist position at the bottom is not treated fairly. But all praise to Coleridge's map, which makes such reflection possible.

Coleridge lived on the threshold of a broadening religious sensibility. Furthermore he was one of its pathfinders. He was instinctively open to visionary religious writers such as Boehme and Swedenborg who were shunned by the orthodox. There are even Latin quotations from Swedenborg's *De Equo Alba* in *Opus Maximum* that have not been identified as such (or coherently translated! — *OM,* 119 and 153). And yet — how can anyone reasonably justify Coleridge's excruciating mistreatment of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Fragment 3 (*OM,* 277-83) of that same work? Selecting out of context a passage from the sacred book of another culture in order to demonstrate the moral superiority of Judaeo-Christianity to Hindu "childish intellects", by scoffing at their representations of God's vastness, does Coleridge no credit. This is the Coleridge that history should leave behind: at his best he pointed forward.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, as one of the generation that followed, read Coleridge's philosophical works with attention and approval. Coleridge's writings on reason and understanding, and the respective claims of reason and faith, were helpful catalysts for the development of Emerson's thought while he was liberalising his position as a Christian, and shifting the base of his faith from a primary reliance on the Bible towards an increasing valuation of the Quaker notion of the inner light, the insights of Platonism, and countless other sources. Emerson's Transcendentalist school did not feel the need to regard God and Nature as in opposition, and they came increasingly to read and treat the sacred texts of the east such as the Bhagavad Gita with the same respect as the Bible of their own religion. This does not entail a rejection of Christianity, rather a reframing through the complementary insights that other traditions offer. Next would follow William James's more secular view of religious experience as a supremely valuable component of human consciousness. In celebrating Coleridge's two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary this is what I would claim for Coleridge, what has motivated me to keep reading him, and — in addition to timeless poetry — what I feel he can offer a modern world where religious experience cries out to be assimilated and aligned with a worldview that has been radically changed by advances in scientific knowledge.

STC at 32
James Northcote (1746-1831); oil; 1804; (30 x 25 in.)
Jesus College, Cambridge; MP cat. 9