Joshua King

reads

Religion in Romantic England: An Anthology of Primary Sources

(Baylor University Press, 2018)

edited by Jeffrey W. Barbeau

ROMANTICISTS HAVE OVER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES steadily recognized the vital role played by religion in the literature, culture, and politics of the period. Yet scholarship on Romanticism and religion by figures such as Stephen Prickett, and, more recently, Lori Branch and Colin Jager (to name just three), has not been accompanied by an authoritative anthology suitable for exposing students and scholars to the variety and intensity of religion in the Romantic era. This need has been partially addressed by sections devoted to religion in anthologies, as in Simon Bainbridge's *Romanticism: A Sourcebook* (2008). But only with Jeffrey Barbeau's *Religion in Romantic England* has a robust and widely applicable collection arrived. Expertly selected, introduced, and annotated, Barbeau's anthology is the best and most expansive compilation of primary readings on its title subject.

Barbeau is a familiar name to students of Romantic literature and religion as a result of his distinguished scholarship on the theology, writings, and lives of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his daughter, Sara. His attention in this anthology is on English Christianity and English Christians, therefore largely leaving out other religious traditions as well as religion in the rest of the British archipelago. While obviously limiting, this restriction also lends coherence. Generous in selection (at nearly 500 pages with seventy-one authors), *Religion in Romantic England* for the most part avoids uneven representation, attending to all the major denominations rather than overemphasizing Anglicanism. That said, he might have included more women authors: there are only seven, and, given Barbeau's expertise, it is surprising to find a serious religious writer like Sara Coleridge passed over. Barbeau, who is an established theologian and religious historian, gracefully draws upon his knowledge of English theology and religious history when introducing the volume and each of the excerpts, shielding his prose from jargon even as he deftly elucidates doctrines (e.g., what was at stake in arguments over the Trinity?) and denominational differences (e.g., which groups dissented from the Church of England, and how did Methodists fit into the picture?).

The introduction is useful in itself as an overview of the religious investments and disagreements that shaped Romantic England. Indeed, his delimitation of the period by events in religious history—the rise of Methodism in the 1750s and the advent of the Oxford Movement in the 1830s (xviii)—is itself an invitation to rethink how "Romanticism" is framed, particularly the waning but persistent tendency of literary scholars to treat "religion" as a subordinate concern, rather than, as Barbeau contends, a multivalent and dominant phenomenon that "saturated Romantic society" (xix). Barbeau accordingly groups selections in ten categories that take seriously

the theological ideas and doctrinal controversies preoccupying Romantic England, from competing claims about the nature of God ("Divinity"); to convictions about the roles of divine grace and human responsibility in saving faith—and related questions about predestination and free will ("Faith"); to clashes over the authority of church traditions, creeds, and critical scholarship in defining and interpreting the Bible ("Canon"); to the transformation of faith into a matter of dramatic spectacle, inward revelation, and democratic participation, variously encouraged by the rise of evangelicalism and claims to personal inspiration ("Enthusiasm"); to the power of poetics in shaping faith through hymns, devotional verse, and religious lyric ("Psalms"); to debates over church-state relations and religious toleration in the life of the nation ("Nation"); to (Protestant) Christian representations of other religions and cultures provoked by empire and missions, as well as appeals for political liberty by religious minorities at home ("Outsiders"). Even this selective sampling of Barbeau's sections (the others are "Doubt," "Morals," and "Papacy") will suggest intersections between the anthology and existing scholarship on Romantic literature and its entanglements with—for example—Calvinism (e.g., Alan Rawes and others on Byron's preoccupation with predestination); enthusiasm and Methodism (e.g., Jonathan Mee and Jaspar Cragwall); empire and religion (e.g., Dan White); and biblical criticism and poetics (e.g., Elinor Shaffer, Stephen Prickett, James Engell, and many others). Barbeau, indeed, notes some of these links in his introductions to selections. These are only a few of the many ways in which Barbeau's anthology supplements and extends evolving lines of inquiry in Romantic studies.

Despite many notable achievements, described further below, this anthology in some respects falls short of one of its goals: helping scholars and students of literature integrate "Romanticism *and* religion" (xxix). Barbeau is especially concerned to help those in English departments connect the "Romanticism" they know to the religious primary sources he has gathered (his introduction frequently highlights writers who regularly appear on syllabi, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Blake, Hunt, Wollstonecraft, Bentham, Barbauld, and Priestley). One wishes he had more extensively used his commentary to link the literature of this "Romanticism" to the theological and devotional writings that fill the majority of his pages but (until now) have never entered anthologies of English literature.

For example, in the section in which such connections would be most expected, on religious poetry ("Psalms"), Barbeau helpfully includes selections by names known to literary scholars—Newton and Cowper's *Olney Hymns,* Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*, James Montgomery's *The Christian Psalmist*, John Keble's *The Christian Year*, and Hemans's *Records of Woman*. With the exception of Hemans's volume, most of these works—especially the portions chosen by Barbeau—rarely appear on syllabi, and it is smart to encourage wider engagement with less familiar works by invoking familiar names, while also placing them alongside a volume more often treated by historians of hymnody, Charles Wesley's *Hymns for the Use of Families*. Yet in the commentary

for this section, Barbeau sometimes declines to connect dots. For example, when introducing Montgomery and his preface to *The Christian Psalmist*, Barbeau observes that it "belongs alongside other, better-known and widely anthologized essays on Romantic verse" (267), without naming or briefly quoting from the essays that would best support this comparison, notably the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* and the fourteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria*. Barbeau had to keep introductions to each of his seventy-plus authors short; yet even a few suggestive footnotes on this point in his annotated text for Montgomery's preface would have benefitted those English students who should form a vital portion of his prospective audience. Barbeau remarks that Wordsworth's later compositions, such as *The Excursion*, influenced Keble's poetry (as did, he might have added, Wordsworth's earlier poetry) (253), and he titles the section of the anthology devoted to *The Christian Year* "Nature's Praise." Having indirectly prompted comparison, he leaves unmentioned in his commentary and notes any hint as to how Wordsworth's representations of nature might be compared with Keble's. Furthermore, he might have briefly reflected on genre in his commentary to help students appreciate differences between, say, Keble's poems meant to be read meditatively alongside the Book of Common Prayer, Wordsworth's use of sonnets to rehearse ecclesiastical history, and Newton's and Cowper's creation of hymns for communal singing. In short, Barbeau laudably provides *abundant opportunities for* dialogues between the literature of "Romanticism" recognized in many English classrooms and the primary sources more familiar to scholars of religious history, without always facilitating those conversations for the less initiated (in addition, the anthology regrettably lacks an index).

These minor reservations aside, Barbeau's judicious selections allow for fresh encounters with names both familiar and less well-known. Readers might expect to find William Paley's *Natural Theology*, one of the period's most influential works on its title subject. Given Paley's well-known use of the watch analogy to argue for God's existence against Hume's skepticism, it is also not surprising to find an excerpt from *Natural Theology* in the anthology's section on "Doubt." Yet rather than excerpting the watch analogy passage (which is helpfully rehearsed in the introduction to Paley), Barbeau selects Paley's concluding attempt in *Natural Theology* to defend God's goodness in the face of evil, natural (e.g., pain) and human (e.g., war and tyranny). This implicitly corrects a misunderstanding of the period's natural theology, which sees it as consumed with defending God's existence through the designs of nature. As Barbeau's selection suggests, Paley and other natural theologians were instead especially motivated by questions of theodicy (can a creation containing evil be the work of a good creator?) which also complexly animate many of the best-known works of English Romanticism, from Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage" and *The Prelude* to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Barbeau's presentation of Paley enables reengagement with Robert Malthus's well-known and often vilified arguments about population, which Barbeau includes in his section on "Morals," opening with Malthus's argument that God's goodness is

demonstrated rather than challenged by the "doctrine of the constant tendency of population to increase beyond the means of subsistence" (333). *An Essay on the Principle of Population* might not often be studied as an essay in theodicy, but Barbeau's extract enables that perception. In the excerpt, Malthus celebrates the virtue of chastity (in a world without contraception) as a check on exhausting food supplies and condemning people to lives of squalid poverty, suggesting deep connections between his and his era's natural theology, moral philosophy, sexual ethics, and political economy. Historian of science Christopher Hamlin has argued with reference to Paley, Malthus, and others that natural theology was a home for the environmental sciences and environmental consciousness in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, anticipating many of the concerns now grouped under those categories. Another entry in Barbeau's section on "Morals," by Mary Wollstonecraft, lends weight to Hamlin's insights while extending them to children's literature. Perhaps known to some for Blake's subversive illustrations of the 1791 edition, Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories from Real Life* were meant provide moral education to children through lessons offered by the lead character, Mrs. Mason, to two girls in her charge. Barbeau's selection comes from Mrs. Mason's teaching of the girls through nature, as she challenges their anthropocentrism by appealing to God's providential design. When the girls destroy insects for sport, Mrs. Mason observes that creatures seemingly unimportant or unappealing in the girls' eyes are nonetheless provided for by God within an interdependent cycle of life and death meant to form a delicate balance between the needs of humans and other creatures. Given that "a great and wise Being" has provided for it, the girls should not "dare to kill" a creature "merely because to you it appears ugly" (323).

Students of the history of medicine will discover unexpected points of interest. An entry from John Wesley, for example, dispels worn caricatures of evangelicals as otherworldly. Wesley ties counsel about holy living and welfare of souls to guidance about a healthy night's sleep—sixty years of observance, he testifies, have taught him that healthy men should have no more than seven hours and women no more than eight (317). Similarly, another Methodist perhaps less well known to students of literature, Adam Clarke, argues in a 1797 dissertation on tobacco that medical evidence reveals the harmful effects of its abuse, and that such dependency further robs the poor of a significant amount of their yearly earnings. Shockingly, he suggests that kneeling for prayer in church had become "impracticable because of the large quantity of tobacco saliva which is ejected in all directions" (329).

If until recent decades it was almost instinctively assumed that religion was a conservative, reactionary force in Romantic England, Barbeau's anthology does much to show how varied and vigorous were its counter-cultural forms. Anna Letitia Barbauld's sermon, *Sins of Government, Sins of the* Nation (1793) is a welcome inclusion sure to be of interest in the classroom. Barbauld witheringly protests against the yoking of worship to the state and its wars by one of the era's many calls for a national day of fasting and prayer, this one on April 9,

1793 in response to France's declaration of war on Britain. Her attack on the modern state's war machine, which has "merchandized" and sanctified "destruction" in wars of plunder and intervention rather than necessary self-defense (373), remains—as Barbeau remarks—"a prophetic warning" (371). Barbauld's mockery of the nation's day of prayer is a feat of biting satire: "God of love, Father of all families of the earth, we are going to tear in pieces our brethren of mankind, but our strength is not equal to our fury; we beseech thee to assist us in the work of slaughter" (375). Her understatement is just as penetrating: "there are men who appear not insensible to the rules of morality as they respect individuals, and who unaccountably disclaim them with respect to nations" (372).

Alongside selections from better-known authors and reformers such as Barbauld and the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson are those by figures such as Soame Jenyns, who controversially argued in 1776 that Christian virtue had nothing to do with patriotism, given that Christianity enjoins imitation of the love and "universal benevolence of our Creator," whereas patriotism calls for the "mean partiality of an English parish officer, who thinks injustice and cruelty meritorious whenever they promote the interests of his own inconsiderable village" (306). Indeed, tensions between nation and religion, between appeals to a confessional state and calls for decoupling creed from full political citizenship, run through most of the anthology's thematic sections, particularly the latter half on "Morals" (in which Soame Jenyns appears), "Nation" (where one finds Barbauld's entry alongside others by figures such as Coleridge, Paine, and George Dyer), "Papacy" (which groups attacks on "popery" by Joseph Blanco White with varied appeals for Catholic emancipation—achieved in 1829—by Catholic and Anglican writers, including Thomas Arnold), and "Outsiders" (which contains an argument for Jewish emancipation by the anthology's sole Jewish author, Francis Henry Goldsmid). Together, entries of these kind point readers to what would be confirmed in the Victorian period: the emergence of an increasingly secular British state, in which religious confession would no longer define political participation, was largely a religious achievement, primarily the result of religious efforts to secure greater liberty of religious practice.

Together with Goldsmid's entry, the anthology's concluding section on "Outsiders" is among the most intriguing. Here Barbeau forms an illuminating combination of writings by those from a range of denominations supporting Christian missions and/or examining non-Christian religions. There is the expected paternalist and bigoted portrayal of other cultures and religions, from the declaration by the Anglican scholar of Arabic and Hebrew, Joseph White, that "nations who have embraced Mahometism are distinguished by a spirit of hostility and hatred to the rest of mankind" (428) to children's literature rehearsing the cruelty and "horrid rites" of heathens by Anglican educator and clergyman William Carus Wilson (454). Yet Barbeau avoids reinforcing facile narratives about missions and accounts of non-Christian religions in the Romantic era simply fanning English cultural superiority and facilitating

imperialism. Though he contradicted his words by supporting and practicing slavery of Africans, in a 1789 tract the evangelical William Knox mixes expressions of cultural superiority with criticism of English Protestants for exhorting Native Americans "to cease to be Indians" in order to be converted (433), arguing instead for voluntary assimilation: "*nothing is to be pressed upon them*" (435). The leader of Baptist missions, William Carey, and the "father" of Methodist missions, Thomas Coke, agree in championing both the intelligence and independence of other peoples. Carey, for example, argues that missionaries should put aside concern for their own safety and seek only the good of those they evangelize, attributes violence against missionaries and other Europeans to "acts of self-defense" (441), and eagerly anticipates non-Europeans shaping—rather than simply receiving—expressions of the gospel and church through "their" own "preaching, writings, or practices" (440). Coke, who supported efforts by Thomas Clarkson and others to found settlements for former slaves in Sierra Leone, contended that black men and women were fully capable of Christian ministry, arguing that a former slave turned Methodist minister in Sierra Leone, Moses Wilkins, was mightily used by God even though because of illiteracy he relied on memory and oral improvisation, rather than the bibliocentrism fundamental to English evangelicalism (447). Writing in 1828, Reginald Heber, the great hymnist and Anglican bishop of Calcutta, reinforces British stereotypes about Hinduism's cruelty and caste oppression, even as he contends these qualities reflect an unfortunate religious and social system rather than the moral character of its adherents, whom he describes as "lively, intelligent, and interesting" as well as "good, gentle, and kind" (458-59).

As should by now be clear, scholars and students of the Romantic era will be grateful to Jeffrey Barbeau for this anthology, a major achievement worthy of being the first of its kind, and certain to be long and regularly consulted.