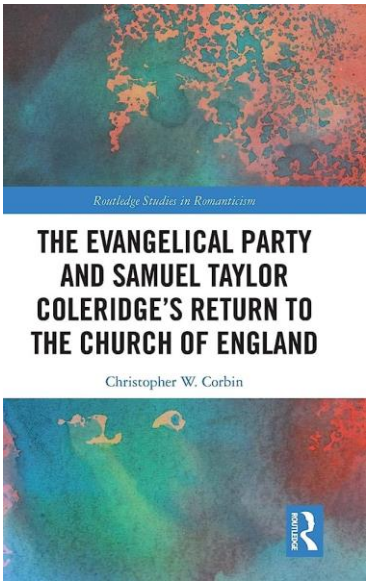
Alan P. R. Gregory

reads

The Evangelical Party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Return to the Church of England

by Christopher W. Corbin[1]

SET IN A WEST COUNTRY VICARAGE, Stephen Beresford's new play, *The Southbury Child*, gives a surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of a rather unsympathetic Anglican priest. Beresford treats the contradictions and compromises of parochial ministry with nuance and compassion. The one lapse in subtlety occurs when he rolls on the predictable caricature of 'enthusiastic' religion in the form of a local Evangelical prayer group. Through their ministrations, a self-tormented, manipulative lad finds Jesus' forgiveness rather after the fashion of a fizzy relief for indigestion. The cliché does little for the plot and feels almost like fulfilling an obligation to contemporary prejudice.



Though the manner and expression has varied, depending on the character of Evangelical enthusiasm, the prejudice itself is a long-standing one as Christopher Corbin makes clear in *The Evangelical Party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Return to the Church of England*. One irony of the contemporary version is that during Coleridge's lifetime, as Corbin shows, the critique of experiential religion was one internal to Evangelicalism as much as it was the burden of polemic from other parties and movements within English Christianity. In this context, 'experiential religion' refers to an understanding of God's redemption that emphasises a *felt* knowledge of divine forgiveness, a realisation grasped in moments of heightened emotion. This experience, furthermore, is authenticating in relation to the Christian identity of both individuals and churches. As Corbin maps the diversity of the Evangelical religion with which Coleridge was acquainted, he highlights a tradition of Anglican Evangelicalism that both embraced an experiential Christianity and subjected it to careful theological and psychological critique. Corbin's overarching argument, which is fascinating in its detail and cumulatively quite persuasive, is that scholars have under-appreciated the importance of Anglican Evangelicalism in mediating Coleridge's return to the Church of England, as well as in informing marked features of his theological commitments.

---

[1] Christopher W. Corbin, *The Evangelical Party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Return to the Church of England* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

During the late-18th century, Evangelicalism developed in the Church of England in various ways, including a self-consciously distinctive Anglican form. The religious landscape in England was, at this time, notably fluid and diverse: the polemically hardened world of nineteenth-century religious parties was yet to emerge, not that there is any shortage of stiff disagreement and sniffy disdain in this time of less-easy classifications. Corbin provides a subtle and illuminating analysis of this period and, especially, of the way in which Anglican Evangelicalism took up prominent Evangelical themes in a manner critically independent of other forms of Evangelicalism. Significantly for the Coleridge side of his case, this expression of Evangelical religion was partly nurtured by the seventeenth-century Anglican theologians that Coleridge also admired. Among these was Archbishop Leighton, whose work, as Corbin shows, Coleridge discussed extensively with Evangelicals such as Thomas Methuen (86, 154). Church historians frequently refer to the Evangelical tradition as a 'religion of the heart', a type that covers Lutheran Pietism, American revivalism, Methodism, and even Hasidic Judaism.[2] An emphasis on a convicting, emotional, and self-authenticating experience of divine grace distinguishes these movements. John Wesley's sermon 'On the Witness of the Spirit' expounds his version of a classic case for 'heart-religion'. Wesley insists on the salvifically decisive difference between the inner certainty that characterises an experience of God's Spirit and the fragility of any conclusions we might draw about our standing in God's favour by way of theological argument or moral progress.[3] Though religions of the heart all stake their soteriological shirt on more or less dramatic affective religious experience, the conclusions they draw from that conviction range widely from antinomianism to qualifying this converting experience in relation to teachings about lifelong spiritual development as well as the significance of the Church. The Anglican Evangelicalism that Corbin argues provided Coleridge with the 'evangelical core' of his faith, belongs to this latter, more conservative expression of 'heart-religion' (100).

From Coleridge's various attempts to state Christianity's credal essentials, Corbin identifies that evangelical core as a consistent underpinning of Coleridge's theological writing. A note of 1810 names the essential doctrines as those of the Fall, of redemption through the incarnation of the 'Word which is from all eternity', the salvific necessity of Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and the sending of the Spirit for the sanctification and restoration of believers. Significantly, Coleridge orders these doctrines in a clearly Trinitarian pattern. Twenty years later, offering a summary of the doctrines he considers fundamental to Christian belief, Coleridge still emphasises necessity of faith in a 'Mediator . . . who is both God and Man', while adding the authoritative sources of this faith in the Bible, as received by the 'universal Church'. The Trinitarian pattern is not fully worked out here but well defined in an

[2] Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 144–51.
[3] John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, third edition (n.p.: Moorley's Print & Publishing, 2015), 287–321.

associated devotional prayer (83–86). As summaries of Christian essentials, these brief texts correspond to the credal insistences of Anglican Evangelicalism, both in what they include and what they omit. In this regard, Corbin's nuanced analysis of the varieties of Evangelicalism and of what distinguished Evangelicals from other eighteenth-century religious movements and groupings, makes a fine and clarifying contribution to an understanding of a Christian landscape more complex than some accounts have recognised.[4]

Among the Evangelicals, the Anglicans present as moderates, especially in relation to the doctrines of predestination and election, but also regarding the importance of an emotionally heightened experience to genuine conversion. On the one hand, that moderation upheld the freedom of the will and funded some tolerance even of explicitly Arminian versions of that freedom. Committed both to free will and predestination, Anglican Evangelicals tended to deny the possibility of intellectually reconciling the two and appealed to divine mystery. In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge would take up the paradox and provide a philosophical account that explained why this was impossible for a human, finite understanding while still grounding the mystery in 'Reason' (*AR* 216–36). On the other hand, Anglican Evangelicals retained the emphasis on conversion while firmly downplaying the excitements of 'enthusiasm' in favour of an account of lifelong growth in moral holiness. In terms of credal doctrines, the Anglicans shared a common centre of gravity with other Evangelicals. As Coleridge expressed it in his notebook entry of 1810, the first essential element of Christian believing is recognising the need of a 'Mediator . . . who is both God and Man', without whom, as a 'child of Wrath . . . I am not of myself capable of moral good' (*CN* III 4005). Coleridge's formulation of this doctrinal core also reveals his reading of Kant. This pushes his account of the Fall on a philosophical trajectory alien to Evangelicals: 'an evil ground existed in my will, previously to any given act, or assignable moment of time'. The Evangelical inspirations of Coleridge's faith appear again in the weight he gives to the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit, both in the 1810 confession and in the 'Nightly Prayer' of 1830. Though sternly unconvinced by claims that glossolalia, and other emotionally charged expressions of the Spirit's work, were demonstratively godly, Anglican Evangelicals held to a strong account of the Spirit's regenerative work in the human heart, a work issuing in real, not merely 'imputed' holiness.[5] Corbin makes the important point that, despite their loyalty to both the Church of England and its prayer book, the Evangelicals found a stumbling block in the teaching that baptism, including infant baptism, effected regeneration (166–69). Similarly, Coleridge's account of Christian essentials does not mention baptism, and so, by this omission, separates the gift of the Spirit from the sacrament. In an 1815 letter to Robert Brabant, Coleridge recognised his theological affinities with the Evangelicals,

[4] For instance, Gordon Mursell, *English Spirituality: From 1700 to the Present* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), ch. 1.

[5] For a good example of the difference between the Evangelical position and the doctrine of holiness as 'imputed', see the conversation between John Wesley and the Moravian leader, Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, translated in Jürgen Moltmann, *Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1992), 167–71.

specifically in relation to the Trinitarian grounding of his convictions concerning redemption through Christ as mediator and sanctification by the Spirit. The 'Evangelical Clergy', he wrote, though insufficient in their learning, are 'the ones really saving the church' and, precisely in opposition to the anti-Trinitarianism of the 'Socinians' whose theology had turned the Church of England away from the common heritage of the sixteenth-century Reformers (18, 69, 154).

While Corbin's account is a good deal richer and much more detailed, these brief summaries of faith that Coleridge composed in 1810 and 1830 serve to indicate his main doctrinal sympathies with Evangelicalism in general and, most particularly, with its Anglican interpreters. They also invite two questions vital to Corbin's case. Though Anglican Evangelicals often diagnosed emotionalism and enthusiasm in religion as more likely the product of an 'overheated imagination' than evidence of a serious conversion, they still insisted on an experience of inner transformation, a deeply rooted and evident moral change that issued in 'the habitual love of God and man' (70). In this way, Anglican Evangelicalism remained 'experiential', a 'religion of the heart'. What, then, does Coleridge make of this experiential claim, either with reference to more excitable forms of Christian devotion or to the 'serious impressions' that underlay the moral progress of the Anglican Evangelical (70)? The second question recalls John Henry Newman's rather sniffy comment about Coleridge's indulgence in 'liberty of speculation'.[6] 'Practical religion' remains in the foreground of Evangelicalism. Practical religion, though, did not mean uninformed, illiterate, or uneducated religion. John and Charles Wesley actively promoted devotional literacy among Methodists, while Anglican Evangelicals read widely among the classics of practical divinity as well as such seventeenth-century writers as Richard Field, Jeremy Taylor, Baxter, and Leighton, as well as Milton and Bunyan, whose *Pilgrim's Progress*, Coleridge regarded as 'the best SUMMA THEOLOGIÆ *Evangelicæ* ever produced by a writer not miraculously inspired' (152). Nonetheless, Evangelicals were wary of theological reflection that appeared to stray from practical benefits for faith and practice, and, as Coleridge himself bemoaned, Evangelical clergy were deficient in 'theological and philosophical learning'. Given Coleridge's strenuous metaphysical efforts at formulating a 'Christian philosophy' or a philosophically responsible Christian theology, how seriously should we take and in what terms should we understand the Evangelical influence for which Corbin argues?

In a 1799 Notebook entry, Coleridge made this rather programmatic remark, 'Socinianism Moonlight—Methodism &ct A Stove! O for some Sun that shall unite Light & Warmth!' (87). As Corbin wisely warns, we should take this well-known but early comment as pointing in a direction rather than reflecting a fixed conclusion. Coleridge did, however, continue to deploy the contrasted images of 'warmth' and 'light' in exploring the relationship between

[6] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. Ian Ker, new edition (London: Penguin, 2004), 94.

religion and philosophy. Significantly for Corbin's case, Coleridge frequently emphasises the importance of 'warmth' over 'light' when assessing the religious alternatives of rationalist Socinianism and Evangelical enthusiasm. Polemic against the latter Coleridge compares with crying fire when the church windows reflect the light from a churchyard bonfire, while ignoring 'the Dry Rot of virtual Socinianism . . . snugly at work in the Beams and Joists of the venerable Edifice'. In keeping with the way Anglican Evangelicals privileged growth in moral holiness over sudden shudderings of feeling, Coleridge focuses on the dynamics of motivation as realised in the 'two great components of our nature', volition and intellect. The relationship of willing and knowing corresponds in terms of philosophical psychology to the similarly vital relationship between religion and philosophy at the level of culture and institution. The root of human fallenness is not ignorance but the corrupted will, so the will must take precedence in salvation, and only religion as the instrument of God's Spirit, possesses the necessary power to move the will to God. The priority that Coleridge gives to volition over cognition, as well as to religion over philosophy underlies his preference for the motivating, 'nourishing Warmth' of an over-exuberant and under-educated Evangelical to the cold light of the uncommitted intellect. The duality is so important for Coleridge that he uses it in the *Opus Maximum* to secure the personality and freedom of God against pantheist necessity (103–5). Thus, we have to recognise in the divine being, the ontological priority of God's will over God's being; only so may the Christian confess, 'God *is* Love'.

Coleridge's reading of the dynamics of volition and knowledge, together with its consequence in placing philosophy firmly in the service of religion, begs the question of Coleridge's 'Christian philosophy' in relation to an Evangelicalism that, even in its Anglican form, saw faint worth in metaphysics. As Corbin recognises, this is a part of the reason why identifying Coleridge as an Evangelical in any straightforward sense simply won't convince. Interpreters of Coleridge's theological development have mostly placed the doctrine of the Trinity front and centre as driving his trajectory from Unitarianism to the Church of England. For all the importance that Coleridge came to place on Trinitarianism, Corbin makes a very persuasive case that the crucial doctrinal fulcrum of this change in religious allegiance involves the classical, orthodox accounts of human fallenness, the universality of sin, and redemption through Christ. 'The two great moments of the Christian Religion are, Original Sin and Redemption; *that* the Ground; *this* the Superstructure of our faith' (111). As Corbin shows, Coleridge's various expositions of Fall, sin, and redemption align closely with the convictions of Anglican Evangelicals, especially in taking moderate positions on such doctrines as the consequences of the Fall for the moral will, the effects of sin on human reason, election, the assurance of salvation, and 'sensible perceptions' of the Holy Spirit (ch. 4, *passim*). Though Coleridge did not place the emphasis on substitutionary atonement typical of Evangelicals, Corbin observes that for early nineteenth-century Anglican Evangelicalism, in distinction from their religious successors, the claim that

Christ 'paid the price' for sin unpayable by fallen humanity owed its popularity to the rhetorical vividness rather than to any explanatory force.

This connects with a larger point. Among Anglican Evangelicals, indifference to a philosophically informed theology was the obverse of the practical urgency of gospel mission and moral renewal. Coleridge frequently complained about this failure of intellectual seriousness and the consequent lack of learning among Evangelical clergy. Characteristic, however, of Coleridge's own use of philosophy in the apologetic and expository service of Christian faith is his deployment, for instance, of Kantian argument, not to dissipate mystery but rather to ground philosophically the limits of theological discourse and the necessity for the recognition of mystery. Coleridge's quasi-Kantian distinction between Nature and the Will, between the essential self-causativeness of the will and the 'mechanism of Cause and Effect' allows him to reject both the Augustinian account of original sin as inherited and the cultural transmission theory proposed by Jeremy Taylor. Both leave us with sin as something that happens to us, as fate or disease. Both, therefore, contradict the nature of sin as a consequence of our volition. Unless, therefore, we are prepared to lose the very root of our humanity, that we are *answerable* before God, reason, supported by experience, and tradition, requires that we acknowledge fallenness as self-corruption. In other Kantian words, the corruption by which we introduce 'some Principle opposed to the Law, some private Maxim or By-law in the Will contrary to the universal Law of right Reason in the Conscience as the *Ground* of [our] action' (*AR* 286), originates in our own will. The will wills its own undoing. That, though, is as much as we can say, 'it is a *Mystery*, that is, a Fact, which we see, but cannot explain; and the doctrine a truth which we apprehend but can neither comprehend nor communicate' (*AR* 288). Nonetheless, apprehension of the mystery is enlightening and returns the believer back to the moral life: 'Dare you trust to it? To [Morality], and to it alone? If so, well! It is at your own risk. I judge you not. Before Him, who cannot be mocked, you stand or fall. But if not, if you have had too good reason to know, that your heart is deceitful and your strength weakness: in this case, there is a Voice that says, Come unto me: and I will give you rest' (*AR* 198–99). Whatever else this is, it is not indulgence in 'a liberty of speculation'.

Christopher Corbin has written an important study that makes a very good case for appreciating Coleridge's lifelong attraction for the religious priorities of Evangelicalism in general and Anglican Evangelicalism in particular. Ironically, the one point at which Coleridge shows little interest in distinctively Evangelical concerns is evangelism. Coleridge's interest in the vocation of public educator, as in *The Friend* or his *Lay Sermons*, is not 'spreading the gospel' in the Evangelical sense. As Corbin points out, this alone would disqualify Coleridge from the ranks of card-carrying Evangelicals (210). He settles for the more just, if modest, conclusion that Coleridge 'shared many of the distinguishing features of the particularly Anglican form of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Evangelicalism' (206). The argument,

though, remains very significant for our understanding of Coleridge's philosophical theology, and why it has the emphases and shaping it has, as well as for aspects of his religious biography. Coleridge's enduring reservations, for instance, about the Church of England, and his late return to receiving communion, make more sense when we consider his Evangelical hopes as to the quality of a truly Christian community (189–91). In addition to a very valuable reading of Coleridge's Christian allegiance, *The Evangelical Party and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Return to the Church of England* does a superb job of mapping the religious landscape of the Church of England during the early-nineteenth century, before party and polemic hardened its diversity.