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0521770351 - Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion: Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit

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Excerpt

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And Coleridge, too, has lately taken wing,
 But like a hawk, encumber'd with his hood,
 Explaining metaphysics to the nation,
 I wish he would explain his Explanation. (Byron *Don Juan*)

The Anglo-Saxons, namely, are naturally no more pure Empiricists than other people, and they have shown this clearly in their Renaissance poetry and their theological Platonism. (Ernst Troeltsch)¹

Coleridge, like some great river, the Orellana, or the St Lawrence, that had been checked and fretted by the rocks or thwarting islands, and suddenly recovers its volume of waters and mighty music, swept at once, as if returning to its natural business, into a continuous strain of eloquent dissertation, certainly the most novel, the most finely illustrated, and traversing the most spacious fields of thought, by transitions the most just and logical, that it was possible to conceive. (Thomas de Quincey)²

S. T. Coleridge's seminal work *Aids to Reflection* was in part composed with the idea of countering the Cambridge 'Atheism' and 'infidelity' which seemed to have influenced his son Derwent, a student at St John's College (*Aids*, p. lxxiii). Coleridge visited Cambridge at the end of his life in 1833 to attend a conference of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and he showed his friends Joseph Henry Green and Dr James Gillman his old undergraduate haunts. We shall argue that the Cambridge connection was of particular significance for Coleridge's thought. It was at Cambridge that the tradition of Locke was pre-eminent in the eighteenth century, especially through the figure of William Paley. The Lockean tradition, represented by Paley, was a formative influence upon the young undergraduate Coleridge at Jesus College,

¹ *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der Modernen Welt* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1928), p. 81.

² *Recollections of the Lake Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 45.

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and it forms a major and recurring target in Coleridge's mature thought. Coleridge was the first of the nineteenth century British Idealists and the founding spirit of the liberal Broad Church movement in Victorian English theology. In both roles, he was reviving the values and temper of the 'latitudinarians' or the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century. His revival of this thought owed much to a powerful infusion of contemporary German thought, in particular Schelling. Cambridge is important for our study both in the sense of producing the immediate backdrop of Coleridge's thought and also as the home of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists – a liberal and rational tradition of theology which Coleridge was consciously trying to reinvoke.

There is another town which will play a role in our narrative; one, however, which Coleridge never visited: Munich. Most commentators on Coleridge associate Schelling exclusively with his heyday in Jena as the young author of the *Transcendental System of Idealism* of 1800. Yet in the vital period of Coleridge's own intellectual development, the first decade of the nineteenth century, Schelling had moved south to the capital city of Bavaria, and had started to develop a powerful alternative form of Idealism which found expression in 1809 in his essay *On Human Freedom*. It is this phase of Schelling's thought which is instructive for any consideration of Coleridge and his German sources.

The present work will concentrate on *Aids to Reflection* (1825; 1832²), Coleridge's major published work on the philosophy of religion. This book was highly influential in England and America in the nineteenth century and ran into twelve editions (*Aids*, cxlv, p. 547), but fell into neglect at the turn of the century. Setting aside a few reprints, John Beer's critical edition of 1993 is the only new edition to have been produced in the twentieth century. *Aids to Reflection* is a seminal work in the philosophy of religion and the history of ideas that has been barely considered by modern scholarship, despite the resurgence of interest that coincides with the modern critical *Collected Coleridge*.

There has been much superb scholarly work, both in editions and expositions, on the thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, despite the increase in information and reliable texts, he remains a much disputed figure in Anglo-American intellectual history, and one whom many critics feel happiest to treat as primarily a poet. Richard Holmes' vigorous and

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exciting biography, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*, is a good example of this tendency. To use an image from Locke, the ambition of this work is to be an ‘Under-Labourer’; to clear the ground for others. Coleridge’s œuvre has not yet been published in its entirety in the critical edition, and when his projected *Opus Maximum* and the *Notebooks* appear our view of him will become much more accurate and complete.

The eminent Victorian Cambridge divine F. J. A. Hort observed that ‘It is a common delusion that Coleridge is well known’.³ The delusion persists. It was just as the Anglo-American idealist professoriate which had its roots in Coleridge (philosophers like John Muirhead or A. E. Taylor) was dying out between the two World Wars that Coleridge was rescued from relative oblivion as a literary critic. It is an indication of a rich and decisive mind that Coleridge could inspire and tease minds who no longer shared the aims and ideals of the Victorians, and who no longer explicitly sought the foundations of a manly character in godliness. Coleridge’s thought belongs to grand-theory philosophy and yet he is a master of the aphorism and fragment. He was, as Walter Pater suggested, striving for the absolute – possessed with a hunger for eternity – and yet he was intensely interested in the details and darkness of human existence. But the institutional parameters of twentieth-century English Literature have tended to marginalise the religious and philosophical core of Coleridge’s thought.

The widespread reluctance to treat Coleridge as a thinker in his own right is, in part at least, due to the persisting influence of certain misapprehensions about the parameters and temper of his thought, and the interpretation of his sources. Whitehead famously called western philosophy a series of footnotes to Plato; but there have been many Platos, and if we approach Coleridge with inappropriate presuppositions it is easy to discover what an incoherent thinker he was – what a bad Platonist or Kantian he was. Some of the misapprehensions which figure in the work of such influential Coleridge scholars as Wellek, Orsini, and McFarland are perfectly reasonable, but they nevertheless distort our perception of Coleridge’s thought.

The primary reason for Coleridge’s enigmatic position in recent

³ Hort, ‘Coleridge’, in *Cambridge Essays contributed by Members of the University*, (Cambridge University Press, 1856), pp. 292–351, p. 293.

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English thought is the continuing influence of the anti-Hellenism of the Ritschl–Harnack tradition of the nineteenth century and the intransigent hostility to philosophical theology of the most influential twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth. This has been compounded by the official Roman Catholic Neo-Thomist opposition to Platonism and idealism as sources of various dangerous heresies: ‘pantheism’, ‘ontologism’, ‘emanationism’, etc. This is to say that the backlash against nineteenth-century religious thought in the twentieth has done much to block our access to Coleridge’s mind. In philosophy, continental thought has been dominated by Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s polemic against Platonism, and analytic empiricist philosophers are often engaged in disentangling ‘Plato’s beard’. For contemporary thought, the Platonic legacy of mind–body dualism, foundationalism, and contemplative rationalism provides a chain of exploded tenets; a series of momentous errors. I cannot hope to defend Coleridge’s views exhaustively on such fundamental issues in an exposition of his philosophy of religion; however, it is important to be aware of the considerable distance between contemporary and early nineteenth-century horizons. Some commentators, troubled by the relation of German ‘idealism’ to Coleridge’s ‘theism’ or the topic of ‘pantheism’, in fact import twentieth-century perspectives which do not represent an increase in wisdom, but a fundamental rejection of Coleridge’s assumptions. Coleridge belongs to a Christian Platonic tradition which stretches from John Scot Eriugena to Hegel, which sees Jerusalem and Athens in harmony, and is inclined to identify philosophy with theology. This is an odd position for contemporary minds, but it is not a symptom of Coleridge’s intellectual aberrations.

The first reasonable misapprehension is that Platonism and Idealism are opposites. This is reasonable because Platonism is apparently a doctrine about objectively existing ideas and Idealism is *prima facie* a doctrine that reality is determined or constructed by a priori subjectivity. Hence Platonism seems ultra-realist: knowledge is discovery; whereas idealism seems anti-realist: reality is constructed by the subject, by the knower. Despite the initial plausibility of such a contrast, it often collapses under scrutiny. Platonism has a strong doctrine of the a priori in the doctrine of recollection, and the dialogue ‘Alcibiades I’ was chosen as the introduction to philosophy in the Platonic Academy because it introduced the central idealistic topic of ‘self-knowledge’. Furthermore, the great revival of Platonism in Germany in the eighteenth century was ushered in by Kant. Like

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Augustine and Descartes, Kant found Platonic notions a welcome tool against the spectre of sceptical empiricism.

Another reasonable misapprehension lies in the domain of ethics. Platonism is a theory about the good and happiness, whereas Kantian ethics is determined by duty and the right. Coleridge must be mistaken if he conflates these two radically different ways of construing the 'good life'. Yet once we look at the arguments and the temper of both thinkers in detail, this apparent dichotomy becomes a striking affinity. The Athenian aristocrat and the Prussian professor share a strident belief in unconditional moral obligations, and a rather pessimistic anthropology. How can this 'crooked timber of humanity' attain genuine goodness, not out of deference to custom, society, or instinct, but out of sheer respect for the good, the moral law; this otherworldliness endows both thinkers for Coleridge with an almost pentecostal power, and distinguishes them from the breezy optimism of Hume and the prudent worldly moral scrupulousness of Aristotle.

Coleridge's appeal to Kant may seem as quixotic as his use of Bacon as the British Plato. Yet Kant inaugurated a Platonic renaissance in German thought. This may seem counter-intuitive; after all, Kant attacked Mendelssohn's Platonic proof of the soul's immortality in his famous *Phaedo* 1767.⁴ But this would be a hasty interpretation. The revival of Platonism in the late eighteenth century rests upon the refutation of scepticism: Plato against the Sophists, or Augustine and Descartes against the sceptics, in maintaining that reason is objective, and that it is not just the expression of the contingent finite point of view. Kant's criticism of Hume's scepticism parallels Augustine's or Descartes' critique of scepticism through its appeal to the 'transcendental unity of apperception'. One of the standard moves is to employ sceptical arguments as part of a larger strategy to show the ineluctability of reason itself. This argument has the rough form that even when one is challenging the rational credentials of a particular judgement or domain of arguments one has to rely at some point on thoughts which themselves are not subject to intelligible doubt.

In chapter one of *Treatise* v. 5 (32), Plotinus attacks Epicurean confidence in sense perception. He argues that sense perception is

⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* translated by N. Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1982), B414ff.

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open to sceptical objections because the known object of sensory awareness is *exterior* to the knower and knowledge of the senses is *mediated* by images; i.e. representational. The inadequacy of such sensory awareness, however, inspires the mind to seek truth at the level of the (divine) intellect, where knower and object known are unified and unmediated by images. Plotinus' deployment of sceptical arguments to establish truth as interior, immediate, and divine bequeathed a clear legacy to Augustine and Descartes: scepticism about the external world leads to interiority, immediacy of genuine knowledge, and divine guarantee of truth. Strikingly, the German Idealists were philosophers in this tradition: whereby truth is conceived primarily not as the correspondence of propositions and facts, but as the self-disclosure of the divine intellect.

Another interpretative problem arises from the assumption that the Enlightenment was essentially a revival of classical paganism in conscious and cultured opposition to the medieval barbarism of Christianity. Some writers, such as Gibbon and Voltaire, could present their age in such terms, but the period preceding Coleridge was still dominated by Christian concerns about heresies, especially concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation: Arianism and Socinianism. Atheism remained clandestine, and strict deism was the viewpoint of a radical, but nevertheless marginal, group. Proponents of non-orthodox forms of Christianity are more typical for the eighteenth century than adherents of outright atheism or agnosticism: in this sense (Socinian?) Locke and Arian Newton formed a powerful precedent for the following century. The intellectual parameters of Coleridge's thought are more theological than is sometimes assumed, because the actual Enlightenment backdrop was dominated as much by Christian theologians such as Priestley and Paley as by the cultured despisers of religion – Hume and Gibbon.

When we consider such issues as Coleridge's 'Platonism', it is necessary to put his thinking into the context where the English universities still demanded subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles, the first being the doctrine of the Trinity, and where thinkers such as Priestley were arguing that the doctrine constitutes a non-biblical 'corruption' smuggled into Christianity by Platonizing Church Fathers. Hence the 'Platonism' at stake is *not* that of Plato's dialogues, or the 'unwritten doctrines' of the Academy, but the allegorising metaphysics of Middle and Neoplatonism which, indeed, formed such a crucial component of Christian theology, and

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the stream of 'Christian Platonism' which was so potent in the early modern period in Florence and Cambridge.

We shall argue that this distinctively Christian context of the debate about Platonism is a vital clue to Coleridge's thought. The doctrine of the Trinity, which seemed both the archetype of a scholastic trifling and yet a pillar of priestcraft to the radicals of the Enlightenment, was revived by the German Idealists in the early nineteenth century, and these German philosophers were drawing upon a Neoplatonic tradition of speculation about the Trinity which has its roots in Plato's *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*. Neoplatonism is characterised by a hierarchy of three 'divine' principles, and in particular a division between two principles – the divine intellect and the supreme source: the One. Christian theologians identified the divine intellect with the Logos or Son, but insisted upon its 'consubstantiality' with its source, the Father. This was a process of effectively 'telescoping' the attributes of two carefully distinguished principles into one absolute but internally differentiated principle. Hence Christianity developed a metaphysics of 'divine subjectivity' in both opposition to and dependence upon late antique metaphysics. The attempt of the German Idealists to replace Spinoza's substance monism, where reality is presented in terms of the modes and attributes of one infinite substance, with subject monism, whereby reality is conceived of as the explication of an absolute 'I AM', does not merely have structural affinities with Christian Platonic speculations, but was in part the product of Enlightenment debates about the 'origins' and 'corruptions' of Christianity which put such Neoplatonic and Christian Platonic topics and ideas into particular – if usually negative – prominence.

For the contemporary mind many of Coleridge's concerns constitute an astonishing confusion and jumble of 'theology' and 'philosophy' and antiquated cultural and political debates about the privileges of the Church of England. Yet we have to attempt to unravel these, by now somewhat alien, concerns. The aim of this work is to set out Coleridge's 'philosophy of religion' as presented in his major published work *Aids to Reflection*, and in particular to try to put Coleridge's book into some context. It is particularly suited for our purposes because it demonstrates *ad oculos* how theological Coleridge's Platonism is. Now Plato's work is usually defined by his use of the dialogue form and the doctrine of the 'ideas' or 'forms'. Such a modern perspective is the product of the Enlightenment

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critique of Christianised-Neoplatonic Plato, the 'Attic Moses', and German nineteenth century philology which drew attention to the precise concerns and form of Plato's œuvre. But within the *living* Platonic tradition, as it were, neither the dialogues nor the ideas play a central role. Since the ideas were placed within the divine mind in the second century AD, Platonists identified the ideas with God's creative intellect, and saw philosophy as the journey or ascent of the finite mind towards the absolute intellect; part of a struggle to become 'like God'. Within this meditative context, a common medium of philosophical writing was a treatise form like that of Plotinus' 'Enneads', a spiralling ascent of the mind; a spiritual exercise aimed at divesting the reader of materialistic assumptions and errors, and providing aids to a bending back or 'reflection' of the soul to its divine source. Hence I wish to consider Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* as a text akin to Bonaventura's *Journey of the Mind to God* or Nicholas of Cusa's *The Vision of God*: a tradition which pursues the Platonic vision up the divided line and out of the cave⁵ into the divine light.

Aids to Reflection began as a collection of 'beauties' from a Scottish mystic and Platonist, Archbishop Robert Leighton. It became a complex and rich philosophy of religion, and the nearest Coleridge came to his projected *Assertion of Religion* or *Opus Maximum*.⁶ *Aids* was the product of his maturity, and unlike the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge was quite satisfied with the book as an expression of his spiritual philosophy. The thesis of this book is that the speculative or philosophical doctrine of the Trinity is the central idea, or better the hidden agenda, in *Aids to Reflection*. Coleridge claims that he has not 'entered on the Doctrine of the Trinity' (*Aids*, p. 156). By this he means that he does not discuss exhaustively and systematically ideas such as 'unity', 'person', 'generation', and 'creation', which are necessary for a thorough treatment of the doctrine. However, his aim is to give an account of the spiritual nature of man, and for Coleridge the spiritual nature of man cannot be separated from the topic of the Christian idea of God as tri-une. *Aids to Reflection for the formation of a manly character on the several grounds of Prudence, Morality and Religion* attempts to show that a man-ly, that is a *virtuous*, character, is only possible on the condition of participation in the divine: the life of virtue presupposes and passes over into godliness, that is, god-likeness.

⁵ *Republic* 509d (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), pp. 249ff.

⁶ This is the view of his pupil F. D. Maurice. See his *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1882), vol. ii, p. 670.

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Aids to Reflection is about the bending back of the soul to God. Yet this bending back or re-flection is only intelligible as the work of the indwelling Logos, the second person of the Trinity. The spiritual nature of man is defined in terms of reflection to God. This reflection to God, Coleridge insists, requires divine aid. The good life can only be understood on this basis: the deepest and richest resources of the moral life coincide with the aids of the divine spirit. The attempt to imitate the good is rooted in the renewing activity of the indwelling Logos. This is why Coleridge repeatedly appeals to the Delphic Oracle 'Know Thyself!': the task of philosophy is to reflect and turn within oneself and thus to transcend oneself and to 'find' God. Philosophy and theology corroborate each other: finite freedom must be thought of as re-flecting into and participating in divine freedom.

The central idea is Platonist, or, to employ a dangerous but pertinent term, 'mystical'. Coleridge is concerned to distinguish his mysticism from the excesses of religious enthusiasm and irrationalism, but feels that eighteenth-century rationalism had almost extinguished the flame of genuine Christian thought and spirituality. The concept of spirit is directed against a shallow *humanism* that sees the good life as attainable through prudence and self-sufficiency. Coleridge believed that 'To feel the full force of Christian Religion it is necessary, for many tempers that they should be made to feel, experientially, the hollowness of human friendship, the presumptuous emptiness of human hopes' (*CL* iv. 893). Coleridge discovered Leighton during the spiritual crisis of 1813: the culmination of his agonies following the collapse of his friendships with William Wordsworth and Sara Hutchinson. It was a period of experience of the impossibility of 'any real *good will* not born anew from the Word and the Spirit!' (*CL* iii. 463). The work was composed at a time of great sadness and anxiety. His son Hartley Coleridge had lost his fellowship at Oriel College, Oxford, in 1820 through a recklessness and 'intemperance' which seemed to mirror his father's agonising problems, and left Coleridge with a profound sense of failure as a father.⁷

Yet this idea of a spiritual philosophy and theology is also directed against a forensic and postivistic scheme that envisages the God of Christianity as a *deus ex machina*, a strictly supernatural suzerain, who intervenes merely to reward and punish his subjects. Coleridge presents a theological humanism which concentrates not upon God

⁷ R. Holmes, *Coleridge, Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins, 1988), pp. 510–18.

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as a transcendent object, but upon the meeting of the human and divine spirit. For all his emphasis upon the ‘will’, Coleridge is not a voluntarist. He does not affirm the will over against reason. In fact, his criticisms of both Paley and Schelling (otherwise unlikely bed-fellows!) rest upon their construal of God as in some sense *primarily* ‘will’. In response to both, Coleridge upholds the characteristically Platonic insistence that the divine will is identical with his nature as good and rational, and cannot be prior to these.

The Christian philosophers of late antiquity saw a genial and providential coincidence between the God of Platonism as the creative *prius* of all being and the Christian vision of God as both:

1. transcendent: rapt in self contemplation
and
2. immanent: the creative activity of the Word and communion with the Spirit.

This re-flection as the work of the Logos is ‘evidence’ of the Trinity; that is God as self-conscious unity and the effective and sustaining power of moral aspiration. Since goodness is unattainable with purely human resources and since God should be thought of as not just the goal of moral aspiration but its very source and sustenance, Coleridge finds in the *philosophical* doctrine of the Trinity an inalienable element of any rigorous theory of ethics. Coleridge felt that the English theology of the eighteenth century was largely insufficient because it denied the Logos as the creative link between the divine transcendence and the world and the Spirit as the principle of the return of creation to its source. In short, the eighteenth century forgot its Trinitarian heritage and its Platonic metaphysical backdrop. What Gibbon and Priestley isolated as the point of the pestilential infection of western civilisation through Neoplatonism, the Christian patristic infatuation with divine triads, and consequent supersession, darkness, and priestcraft, becomes for Coleridge the point at which he seizes upon Lessing and the post-Kantians: their revival of the metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity in Germany. In order to renew the idea of the immanence of the divine, Coleridge turned to the German Idealists: albeit with a critical and independent mind.

The metaphysical doctrine of the Trinity is the key to both Coleridge’s ‘Platonism’ and his ‘Idealism’. Some scholars have questioned the coherence of the very term ‘Christian Platonism’. I follow my own teacher Werner Beierwaltes on this point – Christian