Introduction

The religious dispositions, political aspirations, economic interests, and literary tastes of Dissenting communities impelled the genesis of Romanticism in England. During the late eighteenth century, theological and denominational distinctions inhabited individual manners, shaped political organizations, fueled commercial endeavors, and informed cultural programs. Although there may have been some truth to William Hazlitt's claim in his essay of 1815, "On the Tendency of Sects," that "It would be vain to strew the flowers of poetry round the borders of the Unitarian controversy," in another light Hazlitt's seemingly withering conclusion could not be more misleading.[1] The Romantic Imagination itself, as articulated by the still Unitarian Samuel Taylor Coleridge as early as 1802, long before the *Biographia Literaria*, evolved from an opposition between the "poor stuff" of Greek pantheism – "All natural objects were *dead* . . . but there was a Godkin or Goddesling *included* in each" – and the "*Imagination*, or the modifying, and *co-adunating* Faculty" of the Hebrew poets, for whom "each Thing has a life of it's [*sic*] own, & yet they are all one Life" (*CL*, II, pp. 865–66). If the vast expanse of sermons, pamphlets, tracts, and periodical polemics produced by Hazlitt's "controversial cabal" of Dissenters may in retrospect have appeared a desert in contrast to the blooming, more secular fields of "taste and genius," it is equally clear that nonconformist identities, beliefs, and debates energized and molded much of the cultural achievement that we now associate with the early Romantic movement.[2] It would certainly be insufficient to say that the early Romantic lyrics of Anna Barbauld or Coleridge, to name two of the poets whose works will be discussed in this study, were merely flowers strewn "round the borders of the Unitarian controversy," but it would be even more so to imagine that we can understand late-eighteenth-century taste and genius, including the development of the Romantic lyric, without attending to the myriad thoughts and feelings produced and structured by religious Dissenting publics.

Historicist critics have indelibly redrawn the literary terrain of the period by mapping relations between gender, politics, landscapes, technology, science, and empire, to list a few major subjects of recent revisionary investigation. The sphere in which early Romantic writers imagined and produced new combinations of language and articulated and lived new and often untenable political selves, however, was almost always religious. Literary creation and political expression in late-eighteenth-century England were inextricable from religious discourse and practice, yet the interpenetration of religious, political, and artistic life during the period nonetheless remains insufficiently understood. It is in this area, as an account of the Dissenting genealogy of Romanticism, that this book should make a meaningful contribution to Romantic studies.

Specifically, I hope to provide a nuanced examination of religion in the early Romantic period, applying a detailed understanding of denominational and sectarian cultures.[3] Although my chapters generally focus on one or two authors, methodologically this book differs from other studies of Romantic religion in that my primary concern is with these writers' engagements with and participation in public religious communities, institutions, discourses, and practices, rather than with the influence of religious ideas on their writings. Because of my emphasis on public religion in the late eighteenth century, I have confined my study to authors who were viewed by others, and who viewed themselves, as representing religious beliefs, practices, values, and tastes from within Dissenting communities to various reading publics, including the national "republic of letters." Although William Blake and, to an extent, William Wordsworth could be treated in this manner, they are less obvious candidates than Barbauld, her family circle, and William Godwin, who were born Dissenters, or Mary Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, and Robert Southey, who were deeply and publicly involved in Dissenting life.

In spite of the recent burst of social-historical writings on eighteenth-century religion,[4] few literary studies have appeared that treat Romantic religion as more than an imaginative reaction against a mechanistic and Godless world – Romanticism as "natural supernaturalism," as M. H. Abrams called it, or "spilt religion," in the famous formulation of T. E. Hulme.[5] Robert M. Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (1997) argues for a Romantic movement unified by progressive energies directed not primarily at the political sphere but toward religious reform.[6] His argument is salutary, but by

"the Romantics" Ryan means Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Mary Shelley.[7] My discussion of Barbauld and the influential Aikin family circle along with Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, and Southey will lay the groundwork for the necessary extension of criticism sensitive to religion beyond the traditionally canonical Romantics and back into the mid to late eighteenth century, the period during which the redefinition of Christianity dominated cultural and political life. Ryan, furthermore, understands the Romantic poets "as participants in a single literary movement" unfolding in a "historical milieu" that was "at least as intensely religious in character as it was political," a milieu in which "religion was perceived . . . to function as an ideology of liberation rather than one of repression."[8] To a greater extent than Ryan, I will seek to reveal the tensions and contradictions within the liberatory roles played by religion for the writers under consideration, all of whom thought of themselves as progressive advocates of reform, in both the political and religious senses of the word. Similarly, although this study will return to a specific set of "early Romantic" developments, and the term will prove to be more than just a periodic description for the last thirty or so years of the eighteenth century, I will be less invested in demonstrating the kinds of continuities suggested by the phrase "Romantic movement" than in discovering the diverse and often conflicting ways in which the intellectual, political, and creative world of the late eighteenth century both incorporated and resisted particular and public Dissenting dispositions, assumptions, and interests. Romantic narratives of lyric spontaneity and particularity, political dissidence and apostasy, and creative autonomy emerged out of conversation as well as contestation with Dissenting cultures.

In *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (1999), Martin Priestman provides a necessary supplement to Ryan's examination of the religious ideologies of the major Romantic writers.[9] Although a book on atheism would seem to suggest a different set of concerns from other studies of religion, Priestman's insightful analysis foregrounds the fact that throughout the Romantic period infidelity was almost always a position assumed within, not outside, the sphere of religious debate. At times my readings of Barbauld and Joseph Priestley will differ from Priestman's, but his careful consideration of a wide range of literary and religious texts within specific theological and denominational contexts serves as a model for the kind of attention I wish to pay to early Romantic Dissent. Whereas Ryan, then, describes the progressive attempts of

Romantic writers to reform the political world by reforming the religious world, and whereas Priestman addresses a range of properly religious beliefs that were conceived as atheistic, including the Socinian denial of Christ's divinity, this study seeks to present the all-important middle ground, so to speak, of religious Dissenting life. Unlike many of Priestman's infidels, and unlike the variously nonsectarian yet heterodox major authors to whom Ryan dedicates his chapters, none of whom (with the exception of Blake) was a Dissenter, the subjects of the present study were either born into Dissenting denominations or participated in Dissenting life during periods of lapsed Anglicanism.

Most recently, Mark Canuel's *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* (2002) offers an illuminating and expansive discussion of religious discourses as central to a process by which Romantic writers came to envision the establishment in church and state as a national community that would tolerate and sustain divergent kinds of religious belief.[10] The Gothic genre and the later writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth, especially, depict nonconformist positions and beliefs in relation to political institutions and establishments in order to "embrace nonconformity within newly broadened and invigorated structures of social cooperation."[11] Distinct from Canuel's method and focusing on an earlier era in which heterodox nonconformist networks in particular were still actively defining themselves within and playing a prominent role throughout the public sphere, my approach will be to look squarely at Dissenting communities, beliefs, and practices themselves with a greater degree of specificity than is commonly found in literary-historical accounts of Romantic religion.

Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent, then, will make accessible and meaningful the theologies and cultures that accompanied nonconformist religious life, from the Arminian[12] and Arian[13] tradition of Anna Barbauld's Presbyterianism[14] and the ultra-Calvinism[15] of the Sandemanian[16] sect with which the young William Godwin was affiliated to the Socinianism of Coleridge's Unitarian[17] phase and the anti-dogmatic "Quakerism" that attracted Robert Southey around the turn of the century. In so doing, the book will provide a reflection on the status of religious division itself during the period (see Figure 1). Coleridge's "*co-adunating* Faculty," indeed, would be sorely strained in an age in which beliefs, practices, ideologies, and communities seemed to be proliferating with a dizzying dynamism. When Robert Southey sent his fictitious Spaniard, Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella, off to England in 1807, he reported back a "curious list!" of the "heretical sects in this country":

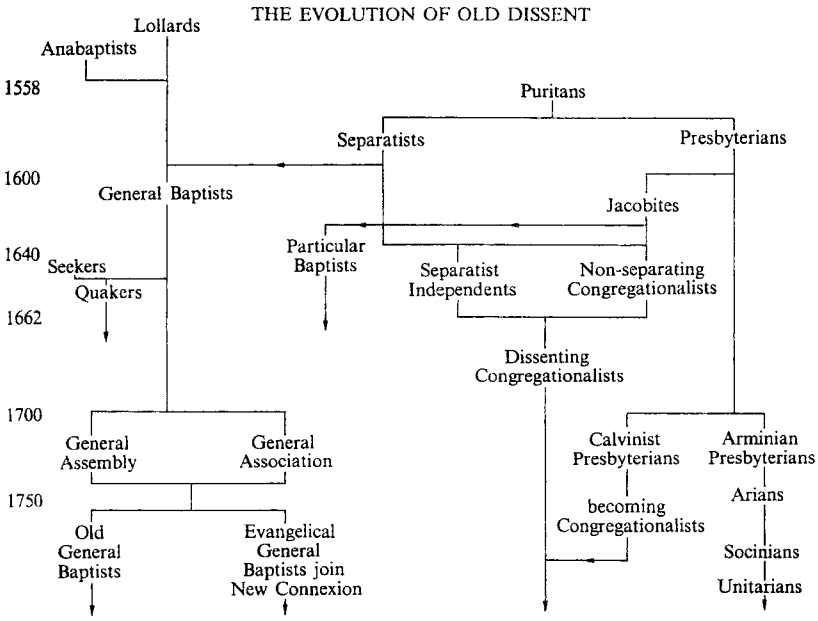

Figure 1. "The Evolution of Old Dissent," from Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution*. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

Arminians, Socinians, Baxterians, Presbyterians, New Americans, Sabellians, Lutherans, Moravians, Swedenborgians, Athanasians, Episcopalians, Arians, Sabbatarians, Trinitarians, Unitarians, Millenarians, Necessarians, Sublapsarians, Supralapsarians, Antinomians, Hutchinsonians, Sandemonians [*sic*], Muggletonians, Baptists, Anabaptists, Paedobaptists, Methodists, Papists, Universalists, Calvinists, Materialists, Destructionists, Brownists, Independants, Protestants, Hugonots, Non-jurors, Seceders, Herhutters [*sic*], Dunkers, Jumpers, Shakers, and Quakers, &c.&c.&c. A precious nomenclature![18]

Simultaneously aided by and in spite of the joke – the "ignorant or insolent manner" in which the "popish author" classes "synonymous appellations . . . as different sects" (II, p. 28) – this "precious nomenclature" signifies what I will propose to be a defining feature of the early Romantic period, its encounter with the seemingly endless variety of religious beliefs and communities, with religious nonconformity.

Especially following the emergence of comparative religion and the revival of Orientalist scholarship (to be discussed in the final chapter), the religious world appeared to many as C. F. Volney described it in an

important passage of *Les Ruines* (1791).[19] When the Lawgiver addresses the nations of the world, he arranges "chaque système de religion, chaque secte" (p. 156) behind its chiefs and doctors: next to the Arabian Prophet and the seventy-two sects of Mahometans stand the "adorateurs de *Jesus*" (p. 160), including Luther and Calvin, behind whom are arrayed

> les sectes subalternes qui subdivisent encore tous ces grand partis: les *Nestoriens*, les *Eutychéens*, les *Jacobites*, les *Iconoclastes*, les *Anabaptistes*, les *Presbytériens*, les *Viclefites*, les *Osiandrins*, les *Manichéens*, les *Piétistes*, les *Adamites*, les *Contemplatifs*, les *Trembleurs*, les *Pleureurs*, et cent autres semblables; tous partis distincts, se persécutant quand ils sont forts, se tolérant quand ils sont foibles [*sic*], se haïssant au nom d'un Dieu de paix. (p. 163)[20]

Such divisions and subdivisions could as easily be satirized in Swiftian lists like these by a still moderately heterodox Southey in 1807 as an infidel Volney in 1791, but for many of the figures this book will examine, including old Dissenters such as Barbauld, Priestley, and Godwin as well as lapsed Anglicans such as Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, and Southey himself during the 1790s, denominational distinctions and identities mattered.

This is not to say that the early Romantic period was a "sectarian" age, as the term is helpfully defined by Bryan Wilson in *Patterns of Sectarianism* (1967). Like Peter L. Berger, Wilson qualifies earlier definitions of denominations and sects provided by Max Weber and H. Richard Niebuhr.[21] For Wilson, sects are characterized by exclusive membership through proof of personal merit, moral rigorism enforced by expulsion, a self-conception of the sect as an elect community, personal perfection as the standard of aspiration, the practice or at least the ideal of a priesthood of all believers, a high level of spontaneous lay participation in public worship, opportunity for the spontaneous expression of commitment to the sect, and hostility or indifference to secular society and the state.[22] If anything, the late eighteenth century witnessed a flourishing not of sectarianism but of denominationalism, with its characteristics of inclusive membership without the imposition of traditional prerequisites, breadth and tolerance combined with infrequent expulsion, an unclear self-conception and unstressed doctrinal positions, the acceptance of conventional standards of morality, a trained professional ministry, restriction of lay participation in formalized services from which spontaneity is largely absent, education of the young instead of evangelism of non-believers, and acceptance of the values of secular society and the state.[23] It is the very openness and fluidity of this denominationalism,

I will propose, that allowed religious thinkers and writers of the period to shape and reshape their aesthetic, political, and moral values through encounters with the range of theologies, habits, and manners accompanying the various communities of English nonconformity.

Although most late-eighteenth-century Dissenters thought of their religious communities in denominational rather than sectarian terms and were not openly hostile to the state, they of course remained opposed in fundamental ways to secular morality and the Established Church. The idea of opposition itself provided a challenge to Dissenters, whose very identity was based on difference: by definition one cannot be a Dissenter without dissenting *from* something else. Faced with the enduring Pauline ideal of a unified Church as well as the persistent early-eighteenth-century disdain for "sects" and "sectaries," Dissenters were forced to articulate the virtues of religious division precisely as a means toward political and social unity, or at least harmony. At stake in such struggles to claim and define unity was a radical schism between conflicting views of the individual, the nation, and God. Thus on Sunday, 17 April 1774, in his opening sermon at the first Unitarian chapel, in Essex Street, London, Theophilus Lindsey chose for his text Ephesians 4:3, "*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*": "God never designed that Christians should be all of one sentiment, or formed into one great church," Lindsey preached (to an audience including Priestley, Benjamin Franklin, and a government agent), "but that there should be different sects of Christians, and different churches."[24] In denominational division, Lindsey and others saw God's plan for a distinct kind of Christian unity: "in the midst of these differences and varieties, *the unity of the spirit was still to be kept in the bond of peace*; by a brotherly affection, and friendly correspondence one with another."[25] Five years later the Particular Baptist minister Robert Robinson posed the question, in more combative terms, "What if we could shew, that religious uniformity was an illegitimate brat of the mother of harlots?"[26] By disinheriting the "illegitimate brat," Robinson is able to envision a return to the union originally enabled by that "PRIMITIVE RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, which the Saviour of the world bestowed on his followers":

> So many congregations, so many little states, each governed by its own laws, and all independent on [*sic*] one another. Like confederate states they assembled by deputies in one large ecclesiastical body, and deliberated about the common interests of the whole. The whole was unconnected with secular affairs, and all their opinions amounted to no more than advice devoid of coercion.
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> (I, p. xxviii)

"Here was an union," Robinson concludes, but "This is not the union intended by many" (1, pp. xxviii–xxix). It is a union based on different beliefs and practices, on a variety of independent communities equally acceptable in the eyes of a common God. For Richard Price, similarly, in *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), human beings follow the will of God by following their own individual consciences rather than "public authority," in consequence of which the proliferation of forms of religious worship must necessarily keep pace with the number of individuals dissatisfied with the existing established and denominational churches. Among the passages singled out by Edmund Burke for particularly vehement censure is the following: "those who dislike that mode of worship which is prescribed by public authority, ought (if they can find no worship out of the church which they approve) to set up a separate worship for themselves; and by doing this, and giving an example of a rational and manly worship, men of weight, from their rank or literature, may do the greatest service to society and the world."[27] Dissenters thus felt at home with pluralism, and in a description of "experimental preaching," a method to be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, Evangelical ministers could read that "Men may glory in uniformity. Variety, in all his ways, is the glory of the Deity."[28]

At the same time as some Dissenters upheld the virtues of religious division or variety, the peculiar legal status of Dissent often served to unify a wide range of theologically, economically, and culturally discordant groups into what seemed to both Dissenters and Anglicans alike to be one coherent oppositionist body.[29] The oppositionist identity of nonconformists cannot be separated from their largely shared legal status following the legislative inception of Dissent at the Act of Uniformity (1662) and the ensuing ejection of the nonconformist clergy.[30] Although the four major acts of post-Restoration anti-nonconformist legislation, passed between 1661 and 1665 under Charles II, and the Test Act of 1672, did initiate a policy persisting until 1828 that placed legal barriers between Dissenters and participation in the educational, clerical, civil, and political institutions of the English establishment, after the Toleration Act of 1689 legal proscription only applied to Socinian and Arian Dissenters who denied the Trinity.[31] Occasional conformity remained an option, and from 1727 almost annual Indemnity Acts gave Dissenters in practice a significant measure of access to local and even parliamentary power: between 1759 and 1790, thirty-nine Dissenters became Members of Parliament, constituting, however, only one percent of the membership of the House of Commons during that period.[32] Furthermore, after

weathering the threats posed during the latter years of the reign of Queen Anne by the Occasional Conformity Act of 1711 and the Schism Act of 1714, the effects of the latter of which were only arrested by its subsequent repeal under George I, Dissenters publicly identified themselves as anti-Jacobite and firmly faithful to the Hanoverian succession.[33] Thus in the years following Anne's death in 1714, when the Tory backlash against nonconformity following Dr. Sacheverell's trial and the ensuing riots of 1710 had subsided, Dissenters, though still legislatively "marginalized," as we might say, would hardly have thought of themselves in terms of such a category under the Hanoverian regime they ardently supported. Consequently, Dissent did not represent itself as marginal to the main currents of English culture, but rather as a purer form of the English Protestant inheritance. At the same time, however, as heterodox Dissenters painted themselves in patriotic colors as stewards of England's Protestant and Hanoverian legacy, their theological and political rhetoric had to remain oppositional insofar as throughout the eighteenth century the official status of the establishment was theologically Trinitarian: the Athanasian Creed, to which many Presbyterians and General Baptists could not conscientiously subscribe, was part of the Book of Common Prayer and the basis of the first five Articles of the Church of England, and without at least occasional conformity to these Articles, Dissenters were in principle barred from careers in the Church, army, navy, and magistracy, from taking degrees at Oxford and Cambridge, and from parliamentary participation.[34]

While disparate beliefs, practices, and interests divided Dissent into numerous distinct entities, Dissenters were expected by themselves and their opponents to share a commitment to liberty consistent with their arguments against their own legal proscription. In spite of different levels of political commitment among Dissenters, religious nonconformity in the late eighteenth century was associated with a broad and fairly consistent political identity beyond the specifically partisan issue of the Corporation and Test Acts: parliamentary reform for a more equal representation, "Wilkes and Liberty" in the late 1760s, support for Corsican independence and the American colonies in the 1760s and '70s, "Wyvill and Reform" in the early 1780s, abolition of the slave trade and the boycott on sugar in the 1780s and '90s, and opposition to the war with revolutionary France in the mid 1790s. Over four decades these positions, actual or assumed, contributed to the broad association of Dissent with political dissidence, and, as Charles James Fox among others pointed out, in the heated atmosphere of the early 1790s this dissidence could all too

easily be branded sedition. In a popular pamphlet of 1793, Fox sought to restrain the spirit of intolerance directed against Dissenters especially following the Birmingham Riots of July 1791:

> In such a state . . . we extend the prejudices which we have conceived against individuals to the political party or even to the religious sect of which they are members. In this spirit a judge declared from the bench, in the last century, that poisoning was a Popish trick, and I should not be surprised if Bishops were not to preach from the pulpit that sedition is a Presbyterian or a Unitarian vice.[35]

Poison here has as little to do with the Trinity as sedition does with its denial, but in a heightened state of anti-sectarian retrenchment Dissenters could, by mere dint of verbal association, become the "friends of dissention," as in Haddon Smith's *The Church-Man's Answer to the Protestant-Dissenter's Catechism* (1795).[36]

Dissenters themselves frequently elided their radical differences as well in order to present a unified front, not as friends of dissention but as "friends to the civil liberty, and all the essential interests of our fellow citizens," as Priestley characterized them in his carefully titled *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, As Such, By a Dissenter* (1769).[37] Although one's belief or disbelief in the Athanasian Creed, or the staunchness with which one defended orthodox Calvinism from the encroachments of Arminianism, or vice versa, could play a significant role in shaping one's values, manners, and tastes, these differences could also be overshadowed by "the broad and liberal principles of a *Protestant Dissenter*," in the representative words of the General Baptist minister John Evans. These "broad and liberal principles," according to Evans' popular *A Sketch of the Several Denominations into which the Christian World is Divided*, published in 1795 and in its fourteenth edition by the time of his death in 1827, could be reduced to three fundamental and common beliefs: "The principles on which the Dissenters separate from the church of England . . . may be summarily comprehended in these three; 1. The right of private judgment. 2. Liberty of Conscience, and 3. The perfection of scripture as a Christian's *only* rule of faith and practice" (p. 73).[38] Similarly, Samuel Palmer's *The Protestant-Dissenter's Catechism* (1773; in its tenth edition by 1794) – to which Burke referred in the parliamentary debate over the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts in 1790 – opens its second part, "The Reasons of the Protestant Dissent from the Established Church," with the following exchange:

> Q.1. *What are the* grand principles *on which the Protestant Dissenters* ground their separation *from the church by law established?*