CHAPTER 1

Introduction

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The British Romantic period remains one of the most exciting and contested eras in recent literary history. Between the 1780s and early 1830s, poets and artists, politicians and philosophers, critics and mystics shaped the world through their remarkable works. Scholars have recently challenged the longstanding preference for six male poets – Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats – by promoting the work of neglected and marginalized figures who belong to the same period. Women, especially, have become a staple of the curriculum through scholarly editions and critical monographs that expand beyond the novels of Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, and Ann Radcliffe to writers such as Barbauld, Hemans, More, Southcott, and Williams, among many others. Yet these authors represent just a fraction of the riches of the age; indeed, one of the most vibrant movements in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies today challenges the discipline to promote antiracist and anticolonial politics through the recovery of historically marginalized people who suffered stigmatization for their race. Manu Chandler, among the leading scholarly voices in the "Bigger 6" movement, takes up Shelley's famous line in calling these "Brown Romantics" the "unacknowledged legislators of the world."[1]

The widened scope of the discipline has accompanied a return to religion as a crucial area of study. Whenever a writer poses questions about life, death, and the beliefs people hold about meaning in this world (and possibly beyond), the individual has turned to matters of religion, whether in formal or informal terms. In casting off the exclusivity of earlier voices, however, we discover the need to understand more about Romantic-era religion. There is hardly an event in the times that lacked a religious component or response. Revolution and reform are inherently religious acts in the British Romantic age. Some embraced religion and

[1] Manu Samriti Chandler, *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (Lewisburg, PA, 2017), 2–5; cf. https://bigger6romantix.squarespace.com.

others rejected it. Popular misconceptions abound. Surely there was declining interest in some sectors, but the popularity of pulpit performances and open-air revivals in others is too easily overlooked. If the later generations of the nineteenth century struggled over faith and doubt with the rise of modern science and higher biblical criticism, then they owe much to the ferment of their forebears in earlier decades. Still, there are few resources that provide reliable introductions to the ways in which religious beliefs and perceptions shaped the history of the period, factored into diverse literary genres, and contributed to disciplines such as philosophy, politics, and the arts.[2] *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion* provides the first comprehensive survey, setting the stage for a new era of study.

In his groundbreaking work *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), M. H. Abrams offered a tantalizing thesis on the subject of Romanticism and religion, assuming the secularization of theological ideas as the basis of the term "Romantic."[3] Abrams theorized a "progressive secularization" in the wake of Enlightenment, forecasting not the elimination of religion but its "assimilation and reinterpretation . . . as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises."[4] The writers of the age, in such a view, reconstituted theological concepts in innovative forms: "new modes," "new ways," and "new sets" of relations comprised the transformation and reinterpretation of a cultural, Christian inheritance. Abrams's work undermined wooly assertions of a poet's faith on the mere reference to theological language or biblical allusions alone. Still, Abrams's secularization thesis mistakenly assumed that modern rationality leads to the demise of religion and, in this, failed to account for the more complicated ways that religious beliefs and practices pervade the literature of the period.

Subsequent scholarship abided by the tantalizing secularization thesis for a time.[5] In the rise of historicism came a fresh awareness that British

[2] This volume thereby complements *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran, second edition (Cambridge, 2010), in which religion is largely overlooked, and other surveys in which religious concerns appear in a single essay, including *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford, 2005) and *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. David Duff (Oxford, 2018).

[3] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971).

[4] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13.

[5] For a similar critique, see Michael Tomko, "Religion," in *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*, ed. Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright (Chichester, 2012), 339–56; cf. Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007).

Romantic writers participated in a vibrant cultural conversation. Moreover, with the shift away from defining British Romanticism according to a shared mood, the expansion of voices required a closer look at the particularity of religious expression in specific times and places, making the omission of religion even more problematic. Rather than explaining *away* religion, some scholars (particularly since the mid-1990s) have looked critically *for* religion. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason have explained, "rigid boundaries between sacred and secular" misconstrue the period, since dialogue about religious beliefs "was almost inseparable from philosophical, scientific, medical, historical, and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[6] Some have labeled this religious turn in literary theory the "postsecular," not as a mark of some conquest over the secular or even the end of secularity itself but as a new stage of literary investigation, examining the manifold ways that religious expression deepened identity, encouraged freedom from political power, and opened new avenues for the sorts of values cherished in a modern liberal society.[7] The seminal events of the period – moments of political and social unrest, economic reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and progressive advances in education, to name only a few – could be investigated in their particular religious aspects by asking new questions that imprecise binaries between sacred and secular could not manage. The endurance of the secularization thesis has distorted narratives about the period by privileging skeptical attitudes and voices over against religious ones. The reality, as Branch observes, is actually the opposite: the ideas of religion "are not just the parochial concerns of a few among us, but they are questions of language and of living in the world as beings who speak, read, and write: who *make meaning*."[8] Further, with the rising interest in previously marginalized voices, the investigation of literature with the aid of religious studies proves not only informative but also innovative. If scholars in the field of British Romanticism hope to honor marginalized voices and communities, we must necessarily reject both the neglect of religion and the imposition of a single ideological system by deepening our understanding of the diverse beliefs and practices that shaped an increasingly pluralist age.[9] Such

[6] Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2006), 3.
[7] Among the best descriptions of recent trends in the field is Lori Branch, "Postsecular studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Mark Knight (London, 2016), 91–101.
[8] Branch, "Postsecular studies," 100.
[9] Recent scholarship owes much to, even as it moves beyond, the formative work of earlier scholars who explored British Romanticism and Christianity; see, especially, Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism*

a project will recover contributions from overlooked religious communities, subject pervasive caricatures of religious "others" (such as "oriental" subjects) to critical scrutiny, and advance new theoretical approaches to religion and literature.[10] Far from "boring," "outmoded," or simply "irrelevant," the intersection of British Romantic literature and religion from a pluralist perspective has the potential to deliver remarkably fruitful and productive new readings.[11]

Certainly not all scholars working on British Romanticism and religion – or even the contributors to this *Cambridge Companion* – see their work as part of a single critical theory or movement. The field is far too wide. Still, trends may be discerned in works published during the past two decades. Three major lines of inquiry come into view in the scholarly focus on religious themes, individual authors, and sectarian associations.

First, many studies concentrate on prominent *religious themes*. Among the most important is Robert Ryan's *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (1997), which challenges the materialist assumptions that have guided much Romantic criticism since Abrams. Ryan counters the widespread tendency to underestimate the significance of religion in the period, despite a commitment to studying literature "within a broad network of contemporary discourses and social practices."[12] From a different angle, Mark Canuel's *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* (2002) claims that Romantic poets, novelists, and essayists advocated national religious tolerance by undermining the political exploitation of religion by the state.[13] Other representative studies by scholars such as Balfour, Mee, Cragwall, and Jager focus on religiously inflected themes such as enthusiasm, unbelief, and secularism to cast new light on literary works.[14]

and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church (Cambridge, 1976) and Richard Brantley, *Wordsworth's "Natural Methodism"* (New Haven, CT, 1975).

[10] Edward W. Said's reminder that "a major part of the spiritual and intellectual project of the late eighteenth-century was a reconstituted theology" directed toward "a new, revitalized Europe" begins to ask precisely the sorts of questions that some Romanticists have considered (*Orientalism* [New York, 1979], 114–15); for new theoretical perspectives on religion and literature, see Jonathan Roberts, *Blake. Wordsworth. Religion, New Directions in Religion and Literature* (London, 2010).

[11] On the varied reactions to the "religious turn," see Branch, "Postsecular studies," 92.

[12] Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge, 1997), 2.

[13] Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790–1830* (Cambridge, 2002).

[14] Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and Freethought, 1780–1830* (Cambridge, 2000); Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford, CA, 2002); Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2003); Jasper Cragwall, *Lake Methodism: Polite Literature and Popular Religion in England, 1780–1830*

Second, many recent publications focus on *individual authors*. In addition to the considerable work of producing reliable critical editions of neglected authors,[15] helpful works include intellectual biographies in which religion features prominently or studies in which particular religious communities are deemed pivotal to the central ideas or creativity of figures such as Barbauld, Byron, or Blake.[16] Other studies in this same vein consider the role of biblical language or specific religious or doctrinal concerns in an author's poetry or prose.[17]

Finally, a third area of recent scholarship in British Romantic literature and religion concentrates on *sectarian associations*. For example, authors have long recognized the appearance of Asian and especially Islamic traditions and motifs in British Romantic literature (such as Byron's *Giaour* or Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"), but recent scholarship has moved beyond the observation of caricatures such as the "harem" to demonstrate how authors relied on Islamic and Asiatic sources for more creative dimensions of their poetic works and spirituality.[18] Similarly, recent studies of Romantic Judaism have established previously unrecognized intellectual affinities and collaboration between Jews and Christians in early nineteenth-century Britain.[19] Interest remains strong in neglected Christian traditions as well, with ongoing work on the impact that Protestant Dissenting

(Columbus, OH, 2013); Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015).

[15] To provide just one notable example, see *Nonconformist Women Writers, 1720–1840*, gen. ed. Timothy Whelan, 8 vols (London, 2011).

[16] Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford, 2003); Yasmin Solomonescu, *John Thelwall and the Materialist Imagination* (New York, 2014); Felicity James and Ian Inkster, eds, *Religious Dissent and the Aikin-Barbauld Circle, 1740–1860* (Cambridge, 2012); William McCarthy, *Anna Letitia Barbauld: Voice of the Enlightenment* (Baltimore, MD, 2008); Sheila A. Spector, *Byron and the Jews* (Detroit, MI, 2011); Jennifer Jesse, *William Blake's Religious Vision: There's a Methodism in His Madness* (Lanham, MD, 2013).

[17] Deeanne Westbrook, *Wordsworth's Biblical Ghosts* (New York, 2001); Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York, 2008); Christopher Rowland, *The Bible and Blake* (New Haven, CT, 2011); Heidi J. Snow, *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty* (London, 2013).

[18] Representative studies in this rapidly expanding field include Andrew Rudd, *Sympathy and India in British Literature, 1770–1830* (New York, 2011); Mark Lussier, *Romantic Dharma: The Emergence of Buddhism into Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York, 2011); Humberto Garcia, *Islam and the English Enlightenment, 1670–1840* (Baltimore, MD, 2012); Jeffrey Einboden, *Islam and Romanticism: Muslim Currents from Goethe to Emerson* (London, 2014); Samar Attar, *Borrowed Imagination: The British Romantic Poets and Their Arabic-Islamic Sources* (Lanham, MD, 2014); Kathryn S. Freeman, *British Women Writers and the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1785–1835: Re-Orienting Anglo-India* (Burlington, VT, 2014); James Watt, *British Orientalisms, 1759–1835* (Cambridge, 2019).

[19] Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge, 2007); Michael Scrivener, *Jewish Representation in British Literature, 1780–1840: After Shylock* (New York, 2011); Karen A. Weisman, *Singing in a Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812–1847* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018).

traditions[20] and Roman Catholicism[21] have had on British Romantic literature.

These representative works provide only a snapshot of some of the recent scholarly work produced in the field. Such a wide scope means *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion* must necessarily be selective. The following seventeen essays – written by contributors from different disciplinary backgrounds, including literary criticism, history, and religious studies – represent three aspects of the existing conversation: (1) historical developments, (2) literary forms, and (3) disciplinary connections.

The first part of this volume considers *historical developments*. By the end of the eighteenth century, competing voices vied for the attention of the nation. Some Anglicans manifested loyalist and politically conservative tendencies that identified the unity of the nation with the unity of the established Church, while others focused attention on the social concerns of the industrial cities, teaching the need for new birth and the transformed life. Not all agreed. Nonconformist or Dissenting Protestants – Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, for example – challenged the status quo and sought greater religious liberty through preaching, writing, and disputation. Simultaneously, a steady stream of English Roman Catholics returned to Britain after living for generations in exile, seeking refuge from the chaos brought on by political revolution in France. Moreover, even as Roman Catholics sought legal emancipation, other voices appealed for justice. British Jews pursued recognition for their contributions to the nation (there were some 18,000 Jews represented by six synagogues in London by the end of the period).[22] Immigration, trade, and missionary reports from abroad all contributed to a growing awareness of the increasing diversity of religious beliefs within Britain. Translations of the Qur'an and other "orientalist" literature distributed through bodies such as the Asiatic Society spread beliefs from Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, shaping the imagination of artists in their quest for

[20] Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge, 2006); Timothy Whelan, *Other British Voices: Women, Poetry, and Religion, 1766–1840* (New York, 2015); Helen Boyles, *Romanticism and Methodism: The Problem of Religious Enthusiasm* (London, 2017); Andrew O. Winckles, *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the Methodist Media Revolution: "Consider the Lord as Ever Present Reader"* (Liverpool, 2019).

[21] Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Cambridge, 2006); Michael Tomko, *British Romanticism and the Catholic Question: Religion, History and National Identity, 1778–1829* (New York, 2011).

[22] Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Religion in Romantic England: An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Waco, TX, 2018), 460.

understanding about truth, goodness, and freedom. Of course, all the while, some challenged the claims of the national establishment and furthered the rationalist propositions of philosophical materialism, calling into question the political powers that religious authorities buttressed in the process.

These historical developments in the religious aspect of British Romanticism prepare for a robust discussion of the ways that religion contributed to diverse *literary forms* in the second part of this volume. British Romantic poetry overflows with religious references. Many of the most treasured lines stem from ancient texts, and some practiced their craft through translations and imitations of selections drawn from sacred scriptures. The novel, one of the most-discussed literary forms of the period, includes not only books with striking religious elements but also an entire genre devoted to religious themes, simultaneously serving readers as a catechism, devotional guide, and warning against falsehood. In drama and the theater, the religions found frequent representation and critique. Official censorship of subjects implicating Church and state was a matter of course but, censorship aside, crude stereotypes of Jews and Muslims endured, contributing to longstanding caricatures that persist to this day and call for critical scrutiny. Such performances provide a further reminder of the significance of oral discourse in the Romantic period. Although some religious leaders failed to stir the imagination of their listeners, others gathered large assemblies; in fact, the sermon was among the most popular literary forms and both printed sermons and lectures on religious subjects sold in far greater numbers than many of the most celebrated works of the period. The widened scope of the Romantic canon, likewise, has brought fresh attention to life writing. Long after the heyday of evangelical autobiographies in the early eighteenth century, life writing in personal journals, letters, and other literary forms blurred the boundaries of formal authorship associated with publication. These writings were often shared in literary and religious networks, providing models for spiritual and literary collaboration in the process.

The third part of this volume takes up *disciplinary connections* that contributed to the discussion of British Romantic religion. In works of philosophy, science, politics, and the arts, religious ideas shaped the age. The impact of David Hume's views on religion cast an especially long shadow over the period, and philosopher-theologians sought to refute his claims in controversial treatises and systematic volumes, asking fundamental questions about human knowledge, morality, and mortality in the process. Similar questions arose in science or "natural philosophy,"

where the relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds was brought to light through the latest research in chemistry and physiology. Thus, states of mind could be linked more closely to spirituality and open up questions of inspiration, prophecy, and human freedom. Religion was politicized, even as politics mixed with religion. From the outset of events in France, to the seemingly interminable state of war, the abolitionist cause, and the struggle for social and economic reform, politics and religion intermingled. Some of the most trenchant questions were raised by Dissenters, whose voices challenged political power with an urgency that stirred individuals and even entire communities within the nation. In the arts, too, a closer investigation of religion deepens our understanding of the literature of the period. For example, hymn writing became less imitative and more affective in the wake of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival. In the visual arts (especially painting), religious art has often been overlooked in favor of landscapes, seeming to support the secularity so often supposed. Yet religious themes appear not only in the diminutive works of William Blake (so well known to scholars of British Romanticism) but also in paintings of religious scenes that have received comparably less attention.

Together, these three parts – historical developments, literary forms, and disciplinary connections – encourage a new outlook for British Romantic studies. Each essay surveys the topic while also investigating specific cases. Rather than sidelining the contribution of women or particular religious groups to a single essay, each contributor offers observation and analysis of the specific contributions of women and religious minorities that might be overlooked within a given subject area. The *Cambridge Companion* thereby reveals the diverse religious beliefs and practices that pervaded the period, illuminating major cultural developments, the influence of Western and non-Western religions on Romantic literary forms, and the intersection of literature, religion, and other disciplines within British Romanticism.

Not surprisingly, the volume has limitations. No one is more cognizant of the shortcomings of this collection than the editor. Limitations of space necessitated selectivity at every turn. In some places, radical spiritualists and little-known sects could have been considered with great profit, and a wide range of Dissenting figures made far more contributions than could possibly be introduced in this single volume. The selection of forms and genres, similarly, is representative and meant to arouse consideration of other forms that could not be included – private letters, essays and reviews in journals, and the widespread use of dialogue all come to mind. Indeed,

far more could be made of the various disciplinary connections that have been traced in the last part of this book. S. T. Coleridge's projected *magnum opus* – with its goal of exploring an encyclopedic range of liberal arts and sciences, all part of a single interconnected system – might alone have informed a robust, integrative account of religion and literature in the period.

The claim that British Romantic authors "tended to reject formalized religion" is commonplace.[23] The assertion is misleading, at best, in discounting historical and religious particularity in a literature very much of its times. Blake's complex religious etchings are reduced to fanciful imagination, the later Wordsworth only a departure from an earlier enchantment, and the atheism of Shelley little more than a commonplace schoolboy conceit. In this, the theme becomes self-fulfilling: there is no formal religion among the Romantics because Romantics rejected formal religion. Yet such an approach ignores how religion shaped British Romantics in concrete ways: Coleridge wrote his most famous poetry while engaged in Unitarian preaching in and around Bristol, while Byron's Arabic-Islamic subjects reflect his actual travel through Muslim lands.[24] All this says nothing of so many others whose poetry and prose derive from religious subjects of pressing public interest. Religious ideas and traditions permeate the age, for Romanticism was an age of increasing pluralism. These essays help demonstrate the need to attend to voices too long marginalized in the hope that an expanded interest in the role of the religions during the period will open up conversations about the literature of the times and inaugurate a new generation of scholarship.

[23] Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: An Anthology*, fourth edition (Malden, MA, 2012), xxxix.
[24] Einboden, *Islam and Romanticism*, 113.