

Coleridge and Religion

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ABSTRACT

The present article tries to analyze and describe Coleridge's quest for truth, the vindication of the Christian faith as the only true philosophy which formed the master current of his life, to which all his other myriad interests were but tributary rills. I try to follow the thread that leads from Coleridge's Unitarianism of his early days to the Christian orthodoxy of his mature years. The questions posed before us is, first, how and why did Coleridge become a Unitarian? And why did he finally come to reject Unitarianism?

KEYWORDS: Coleridge, religion, Pant isocracy, Unitarian, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

Any study of Coleridge is only one of his many guises-as a literary critic, as a poet, as a political thinker, and as a metaphysician-is bound to be, in itself, incomplete. Coleridge was the one to whom "the unity of all hath been revealed" (Griggs, 1971:221), and no subject, for him, existed in isolation from the central theme-the 'ultimate concern'-or from all the others.

Coleridge set himself a stupendous life's task, no less than overthrow of the most firmly-entrenched preconceptions of his time: the 'locke' tradition in philosophy, the association of 'Hurtley', the utilitarianism of 'Paley' and 'Bentham', the necessitarianism of 'Priestly' and 'Godwin', the Jacobinism of France, the pantheism of 'Spinoza' and the deism and socinianism of eighteenth century. This task was all heavier for him because in his youth he had himself undergone these influences, and the struggle to emancipate himself from them meant an enormous effort of self-knowledge and self-conquest.

The results of it remained fragmentary and incomplete, but we all know how he was thwarted by ill-health, personal unhappiness, and self-reproach for his weakness of will. However, he achieved so much far in advance of the time all the essential 'blue-prints' for Christian apologetic in the nineteenth century and after, to the extent that J.S. Mill, a man of opposite views, called him one of 'the two great seminal minds of England [the other being Bentham] in their age (242). Coleridge was an orthodox Anglican in 1791, a Unitarian in 1794 and experienced personal crisis from 1795 till 1798.

DISCUSSION

Coleridge was a man of wide and comprehensive reading. Any researcher's view and attitude is consciously or unconsciously moulded and formed by all that he/she reads about him. In 1797, when he was in his twenty fifth year, he began to write a series of autobiographical letters to Thomas Poole, and it is from these autobiographical works that we learn most of what is known about his childhood shaping and moulding his mind and character. His father, the 'Rev. John Coleridge', the Vicar of Ottery St. Mary in Devon, was the prime mover and influence on his mind and personality. Every Coleridgean knows how he taught his son about the starry heavens above and how he was moved in his earliest walks and talks with his father. In this regard he, himself, mentions:

My mind had been habituated to the Vast-and
I never regarded my senses in any way as
the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my
creeds by conceptions not by my sight-even
At that age (I, 354).

He added that the others, who are more rationally educated, seem to contemplate nothing but parts, and the universe, according to them, is but a mass of little things; whereas he had early acquired a love of 'the Great', and 'the Whole'. What one notices here is a deep-laid foundation of his philosophy and religion. Indeed, his philosophy is his sense of the Great and the Whole; and his attitude toward Christianity is his association with the faith and character of his father, with "that venerable countenance and name which form my earliest, my recollections and made them religious" (qtd in Brett, 1825:222).

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Coleridge was converted to free thought at the age of fifteen by reading Voltaire's 'Dictionnaire Philosophique'. But on the height of Highgate, years afterwards, he said: "my infidel vanity never touched my heart. With my heart I never did abandon the name of Christ (Gillman,1838:P.23). Later, he took interest in Spinoza's philosophy while his heart remained with St.Paul and St. John. Excited by Votaire, he was also feeding upon the Neoplatonists and conjured over Boehem's 'Aurora' in William Law's translation (Griggs,IV,1971:751).

Coleridge's father wanted him to be a parson and he sent his son to Cambridge in 1791 with such general notion. But Jesus College was then in a ferment of left wing ideas and influences and Coleridge's impulse was always to associate himself ardently with whatever opinions seemed to him most stirring and most true. When people considered him as a reactionary, he said that this was because he had got far ahead of them, and could see much farther. This attitude of him is evident when he had been right through Unitarianism, and "come round to the other side" (Ashe,1917:308). For him to be a Unitarian meant to be a warm sympathizer of French Revolution, and a foe to aristocracy and the Established Church. Radicalism in politics and rationalism in religion went hand in hand.

The birth and growth of Unitarianism took place by Faustus Socinus (1539-1604)-or from Jesus himself. Coleridge considered Joseph Priestley as the founder of modern Unitarianism. It was part of the great leftward drift in ideology that began in sixteenth century, and culminated in the era of French Revolution. During those centuries the de-mythologizing of Christianity was proceeding steadily wherever thought was free and mystery, miracle and finally the whole supernatural basis of the faith were being eliminated. Naturally, it was among the dissenters and radicals in England that this process went furthest and the notions of Presbyterian and Independent congregations evolved strongly into Unitarianism during the eighteenth century. But in that age, when the heavens seemed to declare the glory of God more persuasively than scriptures, a deistic turn of thought was very common even within the Established Church. In such a climate, the more mysterious of the orthodox tenets, such as the Incarnation, the Atonement, and above all, Trinity, began to perish of cold. Thus, most Anglican clergymen managed to retain their orders and benefices even if their views had veered, since ordination, toward Arianism, Socinaism or even pure Deism.

Coleridge as undergraduate should have been caught up in the existing opinions of the day. With a mind so fluid, he could hold Boehme and Voltaire in suspension with Synesius, and flow afterward so rapidly into a succession of philosophic mould-notably Priestley, Hartley, Godwin, Berkeley, Spinoza, Kant and Schelling whose viewpoints he naturally adopted and admired the most at Jesus College. But all Coleridge's biographers, who begin with Gillman, attribute the greatest influence over him to William Frennd at that time. This is for sure that Unitarianism did not affect him through the contact alone, nor through his living in Jesus College which was the hot-bed of Cambridge radicalism-the college in which R.Tyrwhitt had nourished a group of 'young firebands' including Wakefield, Frennd and T. Edwards (Schneider,1957:119). This affected him as a prevailing wind of doctrine in a revolutionary era, and in a wider sense it proves to be penetrating his thought until he was twenty five.

Scientific enlightenment along with optimistic theism was Coleridge's prime concern when he was drafting 'Religious Musing' in 1794. The enlightenment philosophy met with infidelity in France but it was not the same in England. Since he was born with a believing temper and a questing intellect, the tension between these two elements was his internal preoccupation which determined the whole pattern of his life and thought. He longed to find a clue to the powerful maze of thing, and tried different systems of thought before his self-knowledge. This taught him the deep thinking without deep feeling, repentance and faith which led him to pantheism and spiritual pride.

In his youth, the intellect predominated, and eagerly absorbed any philosophy which seemed to explain the universe, particularly Hartley's and Priestley's philosophies which confirmed his own innate sense of an indwelling and omnipresent divine energy. The thought of these two writers were to blend the scientific precision with warmth of religious conviction stirred him to hero-worship. Hartley taught him that life itself, through the Law of Association, automatically builds up 'the being that we are' and led one on by stages from the pleasures of sense to the love of God. This is delightful specially to one who shrunk from self-discipline and the demands of the active life. Priestley taught that 'Nature's vast ever-acting energy' (qtd in Brett,1971:461) was the energy of God himself, everywhere and always causing, impelling and sustaining. According to him, it was fascinating and delightful that one knows all things and know that God was in him/her. His characteristic phrase in 'The Eolian Harp' shows such a sign of great thought that quickened his mind:

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, and intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each, and God of all?(226)

This excerpt shows Priestley's philosophical view, though Coleridge could not have expressed it eloquently. In some lines written to Sara, Coleridge speaks the role of affable archangel in 'Paradise Lost' checking Adam's inquisitiveness, as she reproves him in his speculative flight:

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.
Meek daughter of the family of Christ!
Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd
These shapings of the unregenerate mind;
Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring. (226)

This shows Coleridge's submissive temper and his tendency to look up to others, in this case, transformation of Sara's unresponsiveness to ideas into a sign of spiritual superiority. Through looking into the future, one may find tragic irony in his return to 'abstruse research' as a way of escape from domestic infelicity. The Icarus flight, the warmth and glow of intellectual Sun! - then the melting wings, the return to earth; later, other flights horizontal or downward rather than heavenward, and painfully rather than rapturously sustained, result in the long attempt to combine head and heart in a philosophy adequate to the modern world. This can be considered as an outline of Coleridge's story glimpsed in the 'Eolian Harp'. Here, Hartley's view on the soul is apparent:

From Hope and firmer Faith to perfect Love
Attracted and absorbed: and centered there
God only to behold, and know, and feel,
Till by exclusive consciousness of God
All self-annihilated it shall make
God its Identity: God all in all!
We and our Father one!(227)

The light of thought in Coleridge's poetry follows Hartley and Priestley: "The light of the sun as expansion of God in his essential form of Energy" (Wylie, 1984, 504). Priestley abolished distinction between matter and spirit, and taught a full necessitarianism. In fact he pressed on Hartley's steps and had gone beyond him. What appealed to Coleridge, was Priestley's 'materialism' which could make the best of both worlds and offered all the attractions of it without stigma. 'Matter' turned out to be a kind of energy; God's energy, and so, as Priestley said, it was an immaterial 'as any person could wish for', and 'the reproach of matter is wiped off'. Such views shaped Coleridge's mind during his college years and immediately after, though it is never to forget his childhood and his schoolboy dippings into Neo-Platonism and Boehme.

Radicalism was a political force and discourse during the 1790s. Coleridge felt to incorporate and challenge the ideology of his day i.e. absolute authority of the Church. He believed that "western Christendom and particularly Protestant culture has absorbed Christian ideas, however imperfectly, into its actual structures" (Hedley, 2003:294). Edward also focuses on real radicalism as 'anti-clericalism' and the 'desire for disestablishment' (2004:16).

During the effervescence of the pantisocracy scheme Coleridge's writing to Southey is very different. It is, in fact, full of 'stern republican' sentiment and passion for social justice. He urged Southey "for God's sake" not to enter the Church, avows fraternal love for 'Shad' (Southey's servant who was to accompany the 'aspheterists' to the Susquehanna), and fears that the women in the party may corrupt the children. That Mrs. Fricker - we shall have her teaching the infants Christianity - I mean - that mongrel whelp that foes under its name ..." (Shawcross, 1907:123).

Coleridge was a quick-change artist, delighting to don one intellectual suit after another, and to speak and think in appropriate dialect. A self-justifying activity for him was to set ideas dancing in the system and watch the outcome. At the height of his political phase, when he avowed himself a 'necessitarian' and a believer of 'corporeality of thought' - namely, the use of all the current republican jargon about 'loath'd aristocracy' he still figures as the champion of 'the holy one of Nazareth'. In his political lecture at Bristol in 1795, he urged that the right approach to 'the poor' and oppressed is to plead for them, not to them: 'Go preach the Gospel to the poor!' He invokes the doctrine of necessity in its beginning aspect: vice is the inevitable result of circumstances, so don't blame the sinner, but alter the circumstances. In 1796 he condemns Godwin specially his atheism. He denounced the 'Establishment', political and religious, imputing to it all miseries of bloodshed abroad and martial law at home. He declares that the real enemy is 'not the religion of peace... of the meek and lowly Jesus, ... but the religion of mitres and mysteries' (Patton & Mnn, 1795:42).

Conclusion

It seems that Coleridge considered himself to have been a Unitarian till twenty-five i.e 1797. But his mind was like quicksilver and did not set into rigid mould of reason preaching Unitarian sermons as late as 1798. But Coleridge never ceased to draw nutriment from deeper source of Platonism and Christianity. In his letters and notebooks one can observe his myriad-mindedness at work. In 'Biographia literaria' (I,114) says the time of *The Watchman* (1795) that he was at that time and long after a Trinitarian in philosophy, yet a zealous Unitarian in religion; more accurately a 'psilanthropist', one who believes lord to have been a real son of Joseph and lays the main stress on the resurrection rather than crucifixion.

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