Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion

Jeffrey W. Barbeau

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Series Editor: Marilyn Gaull

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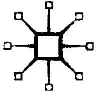

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For Amber

THE PENTAD OF OPERATIVE CHRISTIANITY.

Prothesis
Christ, the Word.

Thesis	*Mesothesis,* or the Indifference,	*Antithesis*
The Scriptures.	The Holy Spirit.	The Church.

Synthesis
The Preacher.

The Scriptures, the Spirit, and the Church, are co-ordinate; the indispensable conditions and the working causes of the perpetuity, and continued renascence and spiritual life of Christ still militant. The Eternal Word, Christ from everlasting, is the *Prothesis,* or identity;—the Scriptures and the Church are the two poles, or *Thesis* and *Antithesis*; and the Preacher in direct line under the Spirit, but likewise the point of junction of the Written Word and the Church, is the *Synthesis.*

This is God's Hand in the World.

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Abbreviations

AR	S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John B. Beer (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).
Assertion	Jeffrey W. Barbeau, ed., *Coleridge's Assertion of Religion: Essays on the Opus Maximum*, Studies in Philosophical Theology, 33 (Louvain: Peeters, 2006).
BL	S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).
C&S	S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976).
CIS	S. T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (London: William Pickering, 1840).
CIS-CC	S. T. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in vol. 2, *SW&F* 1111–71.
CL	*The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71).
CM	S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, eds. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980–2001).
CN	*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen, and Anthony John Harding, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957–2002).
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
Friend	S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969).
Lects 1795	S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971).
LS	S. T. Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972).
ODCC	*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, third ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

Op Max	S. T. Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland, with the assistance of Nicholas Halmi (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002).
PW	S. T. Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, 6 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).
SW&F	S. T. Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, eds. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de. J. Jackson, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).
TT	S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring, 2 vols. (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).
Watchman	S. T. Coleridge, *The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (London and Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970).

Chapter 1

Introduction: "Revealed" Religion and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*

That All may know the TRUTH; *And that the* TRUTH *may make us* FREE!!

John 8:32 (in *Watchman* 3)

So hold up your head, Master Coleridge . . . and speak up like a Man.

S. T. Coleridge (*CN* V 5840)

James Marsh's influential "Preliminary Essay" to the first American edition of *Aids to Reflection* (*AR*; 1829) offers a penetrating assessment of Coleridge's religious system:

> Instead of adopting, like the popular metaphysicians of the day, a system of philosophy at war with religion . . . he boldly asserts the reality of something distinctively spiritual in man, and the futility of all those modes of philosophizing, in which this is not recognized, or which are incompatible with it . . . It is in his view the proper business and the duty of the Christian philosopher to remove all appearance of contradiction between the several manifestations of the one Divine Word, to reconcile reason with revelation, and thus to justify the ways of God to man. (In *AR* 497)

This book is about Coleridge's religious system. John Beer claims that Coleridge's literary production cannot be understood "without

attending to the religious impulses" that pervade his works (*Coleridge's Writings* vii). For Coleridge, talk about religion is, by necessity, talk about revelation—for "a religion not revealed is . . . no religion at all" (*AR* 184). In the *Opus Maximum*, the fragmentary remains of the great "Assertion of Religion," Coleridge plainly declares his hope to demonstrate (1) that religion implies revelation and (2) that Christianity "is the only revelation of universal validity" (*Op Max* 48). In this book, I argue that Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) presents a system of "revealed" religion and provides a framework for recovering his late writings on Christian doctrine. I explain his method of theological inquiry, examine his conception of the Bible, survey his thoughts on each book of the Bible, and place his understanding of Scripture in dialogue with three other sources of divine disclosure: the church, the Spirit, and the preacher.

Bibles permeate Coleridge's England, but Coleridge is no biblicist. Controversies rage throughout the nation—controversies about Bibles, Bible societies, Bible publishing, and the translation of the Bible. Still, though he is aware of all these contemporary concerns, he reads the text with modern German commentators at hand, especially Eichhorn. Coleridge reads Scripture as any other book—no different than Shakespeare, Milton, or Pope. He also prays Scripture. He loves the Psalms and finds strength in the heartfelt, piercing cries of humanity that resound in each chapter of Scripture. In reading the Old Testament, he finds Christ again and again, despite his recognition that the original authors knew nothing of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. Coleridge's heart is with the apostles Paul and John—in their writings, Coleridge finds the principles of true religion expressed in the clearest terms. His commitment to the philosophical truth of Christianity frees him to question the Bible, even at the risk of unorthodoxy.

Coleridge's struggle with orthodoxy cannot be overestimated. Privately, he writes with great freedom, methodically scrutinizing the Bible, noting each verse that strikes his attention, and freely challenging long-standing traditions of the church. Yet he loves the church even as he loves his nation. The traditions of Christianity—the creeds, liturgy, and prayers—are interpretive guides to faith. Church traditions are the "master-key" of biblical interpretation and they guard against the individualism rampant among many Protestants. Still, the Spirit continues to teach individuals by means of Reason. Reason is a philosophical term, widely recognized in Coleridge studies as the source of divinity in the human person. But Coleridge drops the

terminology of Reason when he writes overtly theological or ecclesiastical prose. In its place, Coleridge evokes the activity of the Spirit as the point of correlation and, in the language of Western theology since Augustine, as the source of community. He thereby affirms that the Bible is "the mirror of faith," since Scripture teaches truths that may also be known through the interior work of the Spirit. The same Spirit continues to inspire Christian preachers, who—though frail and fallible—are sources of divine revelation. Preachers speak the word of God just as Old Testament prophets cried out "Thus saith the Lord." Coleridge believes that these four sources of divinity—the Bible, the traditions of the church, the interior work of the Spirit, and the inspired preacher—reveal the Logos.

I first studied *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* because I read that it was about biblical inspiration. Nearly two hundred years after Coleridge's days in Highgate, the meaning, limitations, and implications of biblical inspiration are still matters of discussion and controversy. To my surprise, although Coleridge repeatedly refers to the text as a work on the Bible, I discovered that *Confessions* is a focused, comprehensive treatment of "revealed" religion. He first refers to the manuscript in *Aids to Reflection* as "a series of Letters on the right and the superstitious use and estimation of the Bible" (*AR* 388). Just as he wrote *Aids to Reflection* for "Students intended for the Ministry," so, too, did he propose the "Letters" for "a Candidate for Holy orders in the established church" (*AR* 6; *CL* V 51).

The content of *Confessions* clarifies the relationship between religion and revelation: *Confessions* is an English apology for the Christian doctrine of divine revelation.[1] The text belongs to the genre of Christian apologetics and is among Coleridge's most readable books. *Confessions* is deeply personal, too. He pleads his case, always writing with an eye on the one inquiring into Christianity. He challenges his orthodox peers from the first page on: Must an inquirer into Christianity believe in the full authority of Scripture from the commencement of faith? Is belief in the divine origin of the Bible a first principle? The answer to both is a resounding "no." Coleridge invokes a grammar of assent and maintains that the authority of Scripture grows "as the result and consequence of the belief in Christ" (*CIS* 1). While other English Christians claim the Bible as their religion, Coleridge develops a systematic method of faith.

Through a series of seven letters "to a friend," Coleridge explains his primary aim: "to convince myself and others, that the Bible and Christianity are their own sufficient evidence" (*CIS* 21). A wholly objective and outward conception of the Bible severely hampers a full

account of the Christian faith. "Revealed religion," for Coleridge, "is in its highest contemplation the unity, that is, the identity or co-inherence, of Subjective and Objective" (*CIS* 91). For example, the Bible provides a necessary objective source of the same faith present in the individual subject. Yet Coleridge is not furtively reproducing German theology and philosophy. As a young man, he was fond of Lessing, and collected materials for a biography during his stay in Germany. He critically relies on the biblical scholarship of Eichhorn to the end of his life and marks his personal Bible with marginalia that reflect his ongoing study of German biblical critics. But these influences ought not to overshadow the decidedly English tone of Coleridge's work. His work on Scripture reflects his peculiar knowledge of English theological history, the Reformation-era debates over the authority of the Bible with respect to the traditions of the church, the practices of English evangelical Bible societies that blanketed the nation with religious literature, and the writings of English divines such as Hooker, Baxter, Taylor, and Paley. Coleridge's work on Scripture reminds readers that "the cradle of biblical criticism lay in the English-speaking world"—and even after Germany became the center of new developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Coleridge and others continued to wrestle with both the origin and meaning of the biblical texts (Barr, "Forward" in Reventlow xi).

The "Letters" remained in manuscript until Henry Nelson Coleridge published them as *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in 1840—more than five years after Coleridge's death. Compelling evidence indicates that Coleridge hoped to attach the "Letters on the Bible" to *Aids to Reflection*, but could not include it due to prescribed page limits (*AR* 388). The scenario is corroborated by a letter to Blanco White in July 1825, in which Coleridge claims that the manuscript has "for more than a year been in my Publishers' Hands" (*CL* V 486). A restrictive or even neglectful publisher makes for a convenient end to the story. But Coleridge also maintains in one February 1826 notebook entry that he worried that the response to *Aids to Reflection* might be hindered by his more controversial work on Scripture (*CN* IV 5323). This private assertion echoes the public claim in *Aids to Reflection* that his other disquisitions will be published, "should the reception given to the present volume encourage or permit the publication" (*AR* 388).

The preceding statements have led some to conclude that the proper locus of *Confessions* is *Aids to Reflection*. Elinor Shaffer points out that only the 1854 Bohn edition of *Aids to Reflection* managed to rectify the situation by publishing the two works together. For

Shaffer, the Bohn edition honored Coleridge's "original intention to publish them side by side," a practice that she believes the *Collected Coleridge* ought to have followed ("Ideologies" para. 12). Shaffer's suggestion raises compelling questions, and I am sympathetic to her interest in rehabilitating *Confessions*,[2] but her position must still contend with two troubling facts: (1) Coleridge did not publish *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* with *Aids to Reflection* in 1825 and (2) *Confessions* was never published with *Aids to Reflection* during Coleridge's lifetime—even his later revision of *Aids to Reflection* in 1831 did not include the "Letters." The omission of the "Letters" in the second edition is a curious one. What led to the decision against incorporating his work on the Bible? Surely Coleridge could have attached the "Letters" to the later edition of *Aids to Reflection* had he truly understood them as part and parcel of the same project.

Fear for his public reputation may have encouraged Coleridge to repress the publication of the "Letters" with *Aids to Reflection*. If so, Coleridge accurately assessed the magnitude of the moment: the publication of *Aids to Reflection* signaled his emergence as a major theologian, someone increasingly respected as an *orthodox* thinker. One reviewer, for example, celebrated Coleridge's turn toward theological orthodoxy in *Aids to Reflection*, noting that Coleridge serves as an example of one who, "after all his excursive wanderings into the regions of fancy, all his minute researches through the subtleties of metaphysics and the refinements of philosophy, rests at last, at a mature age, in the conviction that the *Christian faith is the perfection of human intelligence*" (Jackson, *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage* I 486). Coleridge was not above the desire for public approbation, and this interest conceivably led him to withhold his "Letters on the Bible."

However, another possible motivation to withhold his work exists: the unfinished *magnum opus*. By 1828, Coleridge began to conceive of the "Letters" as part of the *magnum opus*, a complete philosophical defense of religion that he dreamed of writing for more than thirty years. According to his fullest description of the *magnum opus*, Coleridge expected the "Letters on Scripture" to take a prefatory role in a principal section of the project. For many years, Coleridge hoped to include a detailed commentary on the Gospel of St. John in the *opus*.[3] In one extensive notebook entry on the "Estecean Methodology," for example, Coleridge claims that the letters constitute part of the fifth section of his *opus* (*CN* V 5868). Why Coleridge initially withheld *Confessions* from *Aids to Reflection* may never be known. Whether this late description of the *opus* was realistically

achievable in his lifetime—McFarland calls the entry an unreliable account and an impossible project—misses the point.[4] By 1828, Coleridge saw his private writings on the Bible (including both the notebook commentaries and the "Letters" that would later be known as *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*) as integral parts of his lifelong goal of producing a system of thought that confirms the philosophical vitality of Christianity as "the one only true Religion."

Structurally, this book follows the outline of Coleridge's "Pentad of Operative Christianity," which prefaces the 1840 publication by Henry Nelson Coleridge:

The Pentad of Operative Christianity.
Prothesis
Christ, the Word.

Thesis	*Mesothesis*, or the Indifference,	*Antithesis*
The Scriptures.	The Holy Spirit.	The Church.

Synthesis
The Preacher[5]

The revealing Word, the Prothesis in Coleridge's scheme, represents the Ground and Absolute Cause. The Word is not Scripture—the written letters of a book—but the divine source of all revelation. The Word is also analogous to the unitary being of God.[6] Coleridge's theology of the Word encompasses his understanding of Christianity. In chapter two, I discuss four confessional claims that Coleridge makes in the first letter: the Trinity, the fallen state of humanity, the plan of redemption, and the nature of Christianity. These are the central teachings of religion that Coleridge returns to throughout his life, from early Unitarianism to later Trinitarianism.

In chapter three, I contextualize Coleridge's biblical study by identifying the ecclesiastical atmosphere of early nineteenth-century England—a religious climate permeated with Christian literature, prayer books, Bible societies, and new versions of the Bible. Coleridge develops a twofold notion of the Bible, linking the latest trends in higher biblical criticism to a philosophical interpretation of the text. One can interpret the Bible using the same methods as any other work of literature. Yet, when read through the eyes of faith, Scripture is a product of divine inspiration that communicates spiritual meanings through symbolical language. The Bible is, thereby, an objective source of divine wisdom; Scripture communicates and confirms what the individual knows by faith.

Coleridge interprets the Old Testament, the subject of chapter four, in light of New Testament teachings on Jesus. He devotes the bulk of his attention—more than any other segment of the Old Testament—to the Pentateuch. Coleridge's study of the Prophets centers on their responsiveness to typological interpretation. Among the wisdom literature of the Writings, Coleridge considers the Psalms, favorably strengthened by their prominence in the Book of Common Prayer, to be a regular source of comfort and permanent interest, while the skeptical and evidentiary uses of Daniel provoke his most scathing notations. He maintains a cautious appreciation of the Apocrypha.

Coleridge believes that the New Testament, the focus of chapter six, completes the Old Testament through a divine disclosure of the Logos. He distinguishes between the so-called Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John without fail—unlike many of Coleridge's contemporaries, who harmonize the four Gospels and thereby reduce them to a single unit. The first three Gospels, written "according to the flesh," are broadly reliable records. The Synoptics are artistic, literary accounts of the life of Christ that provide an early demonstration of Christianity to the Jews. By contrast, John, the Gospel "according to the Spirit," preserves the only true eyewitness account of one of Jesus' original apostles. John explicates Christianity for Christians and explains the redemptive work of Christ. The Epistles provide insight into the teachings of the apostles—especially Paul, whose memoirs comprise the majority of the Book of Acts and whose authentic writings present truths that are harmonious with the Gospel of John. Finally, the Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation), a work of lifelong interest, requires an interpreter who is uniquely skilled with the literary and philosophical senses of the Bible.

Coleridge did not neglect the role of the church and its traditions, as I show in chapter six. In the Pentad, the Scriptures and the church serve as coordinate vehicles of divine revelation. The creeds and liturgy of the Church of England provide an authoritative, though fallible, interpretation of the spiritual sense of Scripture. Coleridge's conception of the church is neither rigid nor dogmatic. The traditions of the church are a living and ongoing record of the work of the Spirit in the churches since the time of Christ; they function as an interpretive key that flows out of the Bible and guard against the Protestant tendency toward individualism.

The objective vehicles of revelation in Scripture and the church are neither more nor less important than the Spirit-guided revelation that comes to the finite subject in Reason. For Coleridge, both objective

and subjective vehicles of revelation are equally necessary parts of the whole revelatory scheme of Christianity. Objective vehicles of revelation require the participation of actively receptive, Spirit-led individuals; likewise, a wholly individualistic faith that fails to interact with the objective testimony of Scripture and church traditions leads to the error of subjectivism. In chapter seven, I examine the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Reason. Reason is a constitutive source of knowledge by which the individual apprehends divine wisdom through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit confirms the objective sources of revelation. Yet Coleridge struggles to develop a robust pneumatology to match his philosophy of religion. His study of Scripture led to numerous questions about the distinctly personal nature of the Spirit, though he formally acquiesces to the broad confessions of the church. The common operation of the Holy Spirit actuates both the authors and readers of Scripture.

In the Pentad of Operative Christianity, the Spirit and the preacher stand in direct line under the Word. The preacher, the focus of chapter eight, orally communicates the divine truth that is drawn from both Scripture and church traditions in a Spirit-guided act. The role of the preacher, almost wholly absent from the *Confessions*, is "to synthesize the conditions into a language which will mediate through the spirit, the one Word" (Happel II 648). Thus the preacher, as "Christ's ambassador and representative," is closely connected to the work of the Spirit in Reason, enabling the finite individual to substitute "a barren acquiescence in the letter for the lively *faith that cometh by hearing*" (*CIS* 63; cf. Romans 10:17). Coleridge—influenced by Protestant thinkers such as Luther, Taylor, and his father John Coleridge—came to recognize the power of the Imagination in the visions and dreams of the Old Testament prophets. In the Christian dispensation, the preacher continues to reveal the truths of God through the unfolding of ideas that stimulate the reflective powers of the hearers.

The conclusion briefly examines the reception of Coleridge's religious system in the nineteenth century. Many early critics claimed that Coleridge invoked a system of religion predicated on the exclusive authority of the individual subject. Although *Confessions* contains the pivotal features of his system of religion, his failure to complete the *magnum opus* limited subsequent appreciation of his distinctive contribution to the history of ideas.

Remarkable intersections exist between Coleridge's overtly religious writings and his work in other fields of study. I believe that Coleridge's method of biblical interpretation, for example, opens his

literary criticism to fresh readings. His critical approach to Scripture, the church, and the role of the Spirit prove remarkably indicative of his literary criticism, political writings, and philosophical commitment to Reason. Seamus Perry explains that "[a]nyone writing about Coleridge must make a decision about coherence" (2). I maintain that anyone writing about Coleridge must also make a decision about his faith. One must decide whether Coleridge was always a radical at heart, a progressively orthodox thinker, a hopelessly conflicted soul, or, as I propose, a man living in the tensions of a journey of faith. "Faith is fidelity," claims Coleridge, "fidelity to the conscience" (*Op Max* 78). Coleridge lived a life of faith, and he was aware of the public consequences of such a decision. John Henry Newman, for example, too quickly collapsed Coleridge's method of theological inquiry with his conclusions, and surreptitiously condemned him for indulging "a liberty of speculation, which no Christian can tolerate" and "conclusions which were often heathen rather than Christian" (94).[7]

By examining Coleridge's system of "revealed religion," I hope to reorient the discussion of Coleridge's coherence from the peculiarities of his conclusions to the genius of his method. Coleridge's "disciples" can be identified less for common beliefs (since so many of his religious conclusions remained unpublished in the private notebooks) as for a shared theological method. Coleridge's comment on Robert Southey's *Life of Wesley* (1820) is instructive:

> The prominent Fault (or what to fault-finders would appear such) of this delightful Work is for me one of its characteristic Charms—the frequent inconsistency, I mean. But observe! only the inconsistency of page this with page that, some 40 or 50 pages apart—no inconsistency of Southey with himself under any one existing impression or in relation to any one fact or set of circumstances! (*CM* V 121)

Shifting attention to Coleridge's method moves the discussion beyond the current impasse over unity and fragmentation, success and failure. More than thirty years after proclaiming "the Truth" in *The Watchman*, Coleridge continued to seek truth faithfully, noting in one notebook entry: "Nothing will do with me, but the Truth, the whole truth and the naked truth when I am writing . . . either this or Silence" (*CN* V 5840). But the epigraph to this chapter—"hold up your head, Master Coleridge . . . and speak up like a Man"—reminds readers that while Coleridge's daring sometimes wavered and his conclusions changed, his commitment to the life of faith endured.

Chapter 2

Christ, the Word: The Coleridgean Creed

I knew my God, and I would have no guide but him.

Goethe (*Wilhelm Meister* I 428)

Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit opens with a peculiar reference to Goethe. Coleridge explains that Carlyle's recent translation of Goethe's *Confessions of a Fair Saint* (part of *Wilhelm Meister*) inspired him to write down his thoughts on the Bible. The allusion provides a poignant reminder of Coleridge's hope to serve others as a spiritual guide. Goethe's *Confessions* is not a series of dark professions by one who has committed an evil deed and seeks absolution through a declaration of Mariner-like culpability. Rather, Goethe's confessor speaks of the trials she has suffered during her lifetime and her steadfast reliance on the "invisible Being": "I knew my God, and I would have no guide but him." Coleridge's cryptic allusion to Goethe indicates that he does not seek absolution in the *Confessions* by unveiling a dark and hideous secret, but that he wishes to teach lessons drawn from the course of a difficult and contemplative life. Coleridge identifies himself with Goethe's confessor—he, too, would rather leave his native country, parents, and friends than act against the dictates of conscience (Goethe I 420). The *Confessions of a Fair Saint* had the power to mollify the "violent and stubborn temper" of Goethe's Aurelia (I 394). Similarly, in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Coleridge offers words to kindle the hearts and minds of his readers, even as he transforms his persona into that of a "beautiful soul" called to instruct others in the way of truth.

Coleridge's self-identification with Goethe's confessor immediately precedes another confession in the first letter—a confession of faith. The connection between the two is not incidental. The confession of faith functions as a strategic theological prolegomenon to the letters and, by extension, to the whole of his mature theology. The confession signals Coleridge's trustworthiness, even while tackling the controversial and sacred doctrines of divine revelation. In this chapter, I explore Coleridge's lifelong struggle to define four fundamental truths of faith that comprise his creed: the Trinity, theological anthropology, redemption, and the nature of Christianity.[1] The confession of faith highlights the centrality of the Logos in Coleridge's Trinitarian theology. After Coleridge's return to Trinitarianism in the early 1800s, the Logos serves as the "all-encompassing" and "unifying principle" in his system.[2] Guthrie's description of the Logos for Heraclitus applies to Coleridge as well: the Logos "seems so puzzlingly to be at the same time the word he utters, the truth which it contains, and the external reality which he conceives himself to be describing" (Mary Anne Perkins 11). By placing his creed at the commencement of the letters, Coleridge distinguishes the Word as the foundation of true religion and the source of all divine knowledge.

The Trinitarian God

Coleridge was the youngest son of Reverend John Coleridge (1719–81) and Ann Bowdon Coleridge (d. 1809). John Coleridge was the vicar at Ottery St. Mary and the author of books including a *Dissertation on the Book of Judges* (1768). John Coleridge was "not a first-rate Genius," claims his son, but he was "a first-rate Christian" (*CL* I 310). A reverent yet endearing humor pervades Coleridge's description of his father. John Coleridge died when his son was only nine years old: "My Father made the world his confidant with respect to his Learning & ingenuity: & the world seems to have kept the secret very faithfully—His various works, uncut, unthumbed, have been preserved free from all pollution, except that of his Family's Tails [*sic*]." Though his direct influence was short-lived, John Coleridge was an orthodox churchman who bequeathed to his son an eye for the work of divinity in the universe, a love for languages, and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Ten years after his father's death, however, Coleridge resided within the radical wings of Jesus College, Cambridge, under the intellectual influence of rising Unitarians such as William Frend (1757–1841) and Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), among others.[3]

Coleridge's theological turn from the Anglicanism of his childhood to Unitarianism during the 1790s is inextricably linked to the politics of dissent. Daniel W. White explains that religious dissent in late-eighteenth-century England is a phenomenon

> accompanied by a broad political identity beyond the specifically partisan issue of the Corporation and Test Acts: parliamentary reform for a more equal representation . . . 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. (181)

Political and religious dissent are vitally linked in Coleridge's thought during the 1790s. As a lecturer in Bristol, Coleridge exemplifies the early Unitarian mindset. The fifth of the *Lectures on Revealed Religion*, "The Corruptions of Christianity," opens with a characteristically Unitarian statement of theism: "That there is one God infinitely wise, powerful and good, and that a future state of Retribution is made certain by the Resurrection of Jesus who is the Messiah—are all the *doctrines* of the Gospel. That Christians must behave towards the majority with loving kindness and submission preserving among themselves a perfect Equality is a Synopsis of its Precepts" (*Lects 1795* 195). As with Joseph Priestley, Coleridge's aversion to the Trinity springs from its apparent contradiction to reason: "A mysterious Doctrine is never more keenly ridiculed, than when a man of sense, who professes it from interested motives, endeavors to make it appear consistent with Reason" (*Lects 1795* 206–07). Coleridge rejects the tendentious and vague reliance on "mystery" that obfuscates Christian Trinitarianism and "volatilizes absurdity into nothingness." He disclaims the Christian application of Plato—that "wild-minded Disciple of Socrates who hid Truth in a dazzle of fantastic allegory"—and the Neoplatonic philosophy of the early Christian Fathers. Yet, philosophically, he allows that the Trinity is "a mysterious way of telling a plain Truth, namely that God is a living Spirit, infinitely powerful, wise and benevolent" (*Lects 1795* 207–08). Similarly, in his 1796 miscellany, *The Watchman*, Coleridge maintains that the belief in a loving God is inconsistent with the brutal English slave trade: "They, who believe a God, believe him to be the loving Parent of all men—And is it possible that they who really believe and fear the Father, should fearlessly authorize the oppression of his Children? The slavery and Tortures, and most horrible Murder of tens of thousands

of his Children!" (136). Coleridge insists that those who support the slave trade do believe in God, "[t]hese men are not Atheists," but their actions against other men and women argue, by contrast, that "they are the causes of Atheism" (137).

Shortly after the demise of *The Watchman*, Coleridge's stance on Unitarianism, along with his view of God, slowly began to waver. One tremor signaling his shifting views came in a letter on June 23, 1797, to Reverend John Prior Estlin (1747–1817), stating that he could no longer receive the Lord's Supper without hypocrisy (*CL* I 337–38). But financial troubles, which followed him for much of his life, presented only two alternatives: he could either continue writing on politics or be forced to take up the Unitarian ministry. The latter option seemed all but assured in an invitation he received to take up the ministry at Shrewsbury, but Coleridge eventually chose to accept an annuity from Tom Wedgwood (1771–1805) and his brother Josiah (1769–1840), with full self-assurance that subsequent private endeavors would validate the decision at some later date: "I have an humble trust, that many years will not pass over my head before I shall have given proof in some way or other that active zeal for Unitarian Christianity, not indolence or indifference, has been the motive of my declining a local and stated settlement as preacher of it" (*CL* I 377). The letters and notebooks of these years reveal Coleridge's internal turmoil; as Willey points out, "one must allow for Coleridge's chameleonism" (*Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 80). On the one hand, Coleridge publicly writes as a "Dissenter" to Estlin, while privately penning a simple yet telling entry in a notebook: "Socinianism Moonlight—Methodism &c A Stove! O for some Sun that shall unite Light & Warmth" (*CL* I 577; *CN* I 467). The turn of mind is important: satisfied with neither the reasonableness of a rational and intellectual faith (in Unitarianism) nor with the enthusiasm he perceived in a largely emotional practice of belief (in evangelical movements such as Methodism), Coleridge longed for a faith that could unite the two in a religion of both head and heart.

The numerous personal challenges he faced during these years certainly implicated matters of spirituality—the strained relationship with his wife, an ever-apparent addiction to opium, and declining health—but Coleridge's concept of God was at the root of these spiritual tremors. Coleridge's reading of Bishop Samuel Horsley's (1733–1806) *Horsley's Letters in Rep. to Dr. P.: Letters from the Archdeacon of Saint Albons in reply to Dr. Priestley* (1784) was the climax of a series of steps toward his complete rejection of Unitarianism: "No Trinity, no God" (*CN* II 2448; February 1805). He describes his

passage from Unitarianism to Trinitarianism as "the Religion of a man, whose Reason would make him an Atheist but whose Heart and Common sense will not permit him to be so" (*CN* II 2448).[4] Coleridge's experience was a genuine re-conversion—simultaneously described in the language of philosophy and spiritual renewal: "O that this Conviction may work upon me and in me/and that my mind may be made up as to the character of Jesus, and of historical Christianity, as clearly as it is of the Logos and intellectual or spiritual Christianity—that I may be made to know either their especial and peculiar Union, or their absolute disunion in any peculiar Sense."[5] Despite his confident rhetoric, Coleridge did not turn from a Unitarian notion of the Godhead to a resolute, Trinitarian perception of the Divine all at once. Herbert W. Piper describes the same Malta notebook entry as if it were a completely unanticipated moment of discovery: "There was no sign of any change in opinion in 1804, but he was converted to a belief in the Trinity in a sudden rush 'at 1:30 p.m. on 12 February, 1805.' The conversion was quite complete . . ." (23). Coleridge claims the thought as one that "burst upon me at once," but his earlier mention of "Socinian Moonlight" reflects his prior irresolution on Christian theism (*CN* II 2448). For example, in one October 1803 notebook entry on the famous Oxford Bampton Lectures (an entry written three years *after* his note on Socinian moonlight), Coleridge argues that Trinitarian doctrine is illogical: "far nobler subjects for yearly Bampton Lectures might be found, than the Trinity that none but an Ideot can believe, & the Existence of God which none but a madman can disbelieve" (*CN* I 1543). Only two months after musing on the idiocy of Trinitarianism, Coleridge, increasingly taken by Kant's philosophy, claims Trinitarian doctrine does not originate in an ancient myth but directly from the claims of Christ.[6] A day or two before his allegedly "sudden" conversion, Coleridge writes in his notebook what Coburn considers "his first recorded explicit statement of Trinitarianism as having supplanted his earlier Unitarianism" (*CN* II 2444n). By the time he left Malta, Italy, on September 23, 1805, Coleridge experienced a profound change in his conception of God.

Coleridge henceforth founded his system on a robust metaphysics of the Logos. Unitarianism became his foil and, as Bate attests, provided an essential backdrop for his mature theology: "How well he could understand the commendable hope and Puritan essentialism of the Unitarian!—had he not himself lived through it, more than taken it for granted, and himself said all that could be said for it? But here, in the Trinity, intelligently interpreted, was the deeper answer he really