

Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion

Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit



Douglas Hedley

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COLERIDGE, PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

Coleridge's relation to his German contemporaries constitutes the toughest problem in assessing his standing as a thinker. For the last half-century this relationship has been described, ultimately, as parasitic. As a result, Coleridge's contribution to religious thought has been seen primarily in terms of his *poetic* genius. This book revives and deepens the evaluation of Coleridge as a philosophical theologian in his own right. Coleridge had a critical and creative relation to, and kinship with, German thought. Moreover, the principal impulse behind his engagement with that philosophy is traced to the more immediate context of the English Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This book re-establishes Coleridge as a philosopher of religion and as a vital source for contemporary theological reflection.

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Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit

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Mind and understanding is, as it were, a diaphanous and crystalline globe, or a kind of notional world, which hath some reflex image, and correspondent ray, or representation in it, to whatsoever is in the true and real world of being.

(Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*,
vol. ii. p. 517)

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Abbreviations

- Aids* *Aids to Reflection*, edited by John Beer, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994.
- BL* *Biographia Literaria*, edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Brinkley *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, edited by Roberta Florence Brinkley, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1955.
- CCS* *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, edited by John Colmer, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.
- CL* *Collected Letters*, edited by Earl Leslie Grigg, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71.
- Coburn *Inquiring Spirit: A New Presentation of Coleridge from His Published and Unpublished Prose Writings*, edited by Kathleen Coburn, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951.
- F* *The Friend*, two vols., edited by Barbara E. Rooke, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.
- Lectures* *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, edited by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- Lit. Rem* *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Henry Nelson Coleridge, 4 vols., London: William Pickering, 1836; New York, 1967.
- Logic* *Logic*, edited by James Robert de Jager Jackson, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- LS* *Lay Sermons, being 'The Statesman's Manual' and 'A Lay Sermon'*, edited by Reginald James White, Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Marg* *Marginalia*, edited by George Whalley, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- NED* *Notes on English Divines*, edited by Derwent Coleridge, 2 vols., London: Edward Moxon, 1853.

- Notebooks* *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Coburn, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955– .
- PL* *Philosophical Lectures, 1818–19*, edited by Kathleen Coburn, London: Pilot Press, 1949.
- SW* *Shorter Works and Fragments*, edited by H. J. and J. R. de J. Jackson, 2 vols., Princeton University Press, 1995.
- TT* *Table Talk, recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge and John Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Carl Woodring, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990.

Notes on the text

The textual basis of this work is the new excellent critical edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* edited by John Beer. This is based upon the corrected edition of 1831 rather than the original 1825 edition. John Beer's critical edition of *Aids to Reflection* is cited as *Aids*. I have excluded all textual history and much of Coleridge's biography in this work because it is dealt with precisely and thoroughly in the extremely rich and informative new edition. References to other Coleridge texts are as far as possible to the Princeton critical edition. I have tried to avoid manuscript references, and if I mention hitherto unpublished material, I refer to journals or books where these materials are quoted and discussed.

For reasons given, this interpretation of *Aids to Reflection* is not meant to be an exhaustive account of Coleridge's thought. In particular I omit considerations about the development of Coleridge's mind. It also seems appropriate to leave to one side discussions of Coleridge's plagiarisms and citations of Schelling in the *Biographia Literaria* and developments in the *Opus Maximum*. I refer the reader to the seminal work by John Beer, Robert Barth S.J. and James Engell on Coleridge's intellectual milieu. John Muirhead's book *Coleridge as Philosopher* (London, 1930) is still excellent on Coleridge's general philosophy. Graham Davidson's *Coleridge's Career* (Basingstoke, 1990) is a powerfully argued vision of Coleridge's intellectual development. Mary Anne Perkins' *Coleridge's Philosophy* (Oxford, 1994) is a full and useful account of the sources and development of the logos concept in Coleridge's projected *Opus Maximum*. Friedrich Uehlein's *Die Manifestation des Selbstbewußtseins* (Hamburg, 1982) is a complex and rigorously argued account of Coleridge's notion of Subjectivity, especially in relation to Schelling.

I do wish to explain something of my reference to, and quotation of, Plotinus and the German Idealists. I use a capital with the term

'Neoplatonist' in order to emphasise the particular structure of this tradition of thought, including those elements in the philosophy that are not strictly 'Platonic'. Plotinus' writings are usually referred to as the 'Enneads' or 'Nines' because his pupil Porphyry arranged his master's work into six sets of *nine* treatises. It is hence strictly inaccurate to write of 'Ennead VI 8' when one wishes to refer to the individual *Treatise* vi. 8 since this is precisely the eighth treatise in the sixth Ennead. Further, we write Plotinus' *Treatise* vi. 8 (39) and then chapter and verse because this was the *thirty-ninth* treatise which Plotinus composed. Quotations are always taken from A. H. Armstrong's authoritative translation (which fortunately preserves Porphyry's division into nines and sixes). Coleridge's 'Platonism' is roughly Plotinus mediated by the great Renaissance Christian philosopher-theologian Marsilio Ficino. Coleridge's direct interest in Ficino is limited, but Ficino provided the lens through which Plato was perceived by Coleridge: both Christian and Neoplatonic.

The situation with respect to German Idealism is, unfortunately, much less satisfactory than with Plotinus. He is a very difficult and surprisingly technical philosopher, but there are few serious scholarly controversies in Plotinus studies. The German Idealist philosophers, on the contrary, have been subject to very controversial interpretation. Many leading scholars of German Idealism minimise the potent religious component in this philosophy. Coleridge on the contrary, saw the movement as profoundly religious, and I shall explain why this was entirely justified. Schelling, in particular, was largely ignored until after the Second World War when he began to be seen as more than a stage on the way to Hegel. There is a revival of Schelling studies at present but interpretations differ strongly. The critical Schelling edition is in its infancy, and only a small section of Schelling's opus has been translated into English. References to Schelling are to the edition of his son K. F. A. Schelling in fourteen volumes (Stuttgart/Augsburg, 1856-61).

Prologue: explaining Coleridge's explanation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The primary reason for Coleridge's enigmatic position in recent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

critique of Christianised-Neoplatonic Plato, the 'Attic Moses', and German nineteenth century philology which drew attention to the precise concerns and form of Plato's oeuvre. But within the *living* Platonic tradition, as it were, neither the dialogues nor the ideas play a central role. Since the ideas were placed within the divine mind in the second century AD, Platonists identified the ideas with God's creative intellect, and saw philosophy as the journey or ascent of the finite mind towards the absolute intellect; part of a struggle to become 'like God'. Within this meditative context, a common medium of philosophical writing was a treatise form like that of Plotinus' 'Enneads', a spiralling ascent of the mind; a spiritual exercise aimed at divesting the reader of materialistic assumptions and errors, and providing aids to a bending back or 'reflection' of the soul to its divine source. Hence I wish to consider Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* as a text akin to Bonaventura's *Journey of the Mind to God* or Nicholas of Cusa's *The Vision of God: a tradition which pursues the Platonic vision up the divided line and out of the cave*⁵ into the divine light.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Platonism was a philosophically genuine form of 'Platonism'. In particular the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity represents the use and transformation of Platonic ideas for Christian purposes. The Christian affirmation of the absolute as a self-related mind means that for Christian Platonism the true system of the universe is intellectual or intelligible, whereas the strictly Hellenic Neoplatonism rejected the idea of intellection in the supreme source of being as incompatible with its unity. This difference between a metaphysics of an inclusive-relational unity of the Christian Godhead and the exclusive unity of the Neoplatonic good constitutes a profound characteristic of Christian Platonism which has very little explicit basis in the biblical tradition. Hence it is anachronistic to dismiss the theological tenet of the Trinity as unphilosophical or irrelevant to the estimation of Coleridge as a philosopher.

Because of the deep influence of Plotinus upon Christian theology and mysticism, it is hard to know, and often irrelevant, whether Plotinus is the direct or indirect source of a particular idea. Plotinus is nevertheless a model of philosophical mysticism for Coleridge, whose philosophical mysticism is idealist *and yet* deeply suspicious of abstract conceptuality; a system of thought that is contemplative and yet very much a philosophy of *life* and *experience*. This seemingly paradoxical mixture of the noetic and the affective has its roots in Plato's *Symposium*, but its most striking philosophical expression is in Plotinus. I shall refer to Coleridge as a philosophical mystic throughout the text, and I mean exactly this temper of mind in Plotinus that veers between a strongly contemplative rationalism and an emphasis upon that which resists conceptual analysis: will; life; experience; God. Some make the mistake of seeing 'Platonism' as purely contemplative or rationalist and then argue that Coleridge is thus 'not entirely' a Platonist. In a sense the 'Platonism' of Coleridge lies precisely in the tension between 'reflection' and 'experience'. The appeal to 'experience' is characteristic of the Platonic approach in the philosophy of religion.

It is anachronistic to assume that 'German Idealism' is a modern secular philosophy that is hostile to 'religion', or that the 'absolute' cannot be conflated with the religious idea of God. Hegel and Schelling were trained as theologians, and German Idealism was deeply imbued with Christian theology. Secondly, German Idealism generally drew upon the intellectualist strand of the Platonic-Neoplatonic tradition of 'natural theology' which (via Plotinus and

Augustine) emphasised the possibility of direct knowledge of God. Schelling is a good example of this; however, in his Munich period he draws upon that other, apophatic, aspect of the Neoplatonic tradition which is most evident in later Neoplatonism (Iamblichus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius) which envisages the absolute as 'unprethinkable'. Untangling the web of idealistic and Neoplatonic tenets and concepts is very important in understanding Coleridge's philosophy of religion. Gibbon ironically wrote of Plato words which apply beautifully and strictly to Coleridge: 'His poetical imagination sometimes fixed and animated these metaphysical abstractions.'⁸

Absolute idealism may seem like a secular substitute for theism because so much *Religionskritik* has sprung from Hegelianism: Feuerbach, Strauss, Marx. Much depends on one's interpretation, but we can at least establish that Coleridge was not confused here. In particular the idea of the 'Platonic Trinity', we shall argue is a point of genuine contact between Coleridge and the Idealists. The dogmas of Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement, the Pauline idea of dying and rising with Christ, were not just interpreted philosophically but deeply influenced their idea of philosophy. Philosophy for Hegel or Schelling is not the maid of theology, supplying apologetic arguments, but the conceptual expression of a specifically Christian vision of the relationship of world and its source: philosophy is itself a form of Christian theology.⁹ Schelling rejected a chair at Tübingen because he was refused permission to teach both theology and philosophy, and Hegel's scathing contempt for Schleiermacher in Berlin was in part based on Hegel's sense of his own superiority as a theologian. The specifically Christian element in the German Idealists is something of an embarrassment to modern critics but it should be emphasised in relation to Coleridge's project of a philosophical assertion of the Christian religion. Coleridge was not trying to force Christian ideas on to the Procrustean bed of German pantheism. We shall argue that Coleridge's attempt to employ ideas from German Idealism in order to revive an anthropology and theology of the Cambridge Platonists and other philosophical mystics is entirely intelligible and even compelling.

It is necessary to consider the resources of Coleridge's thought in

⁸ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols., edited by David Womersley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), vol. i. p. 771

⁹ The most eminent living German theologian is a product of this tradition. See W. Pannenberg, *Theologie und Philosophie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1996), pp. 257ff.

depth – *resources not sources*. Coleridge was an innovator. There was no Platonic tradition in nineteenth-century England which Coleridge could simply perpetuate: Norris, Collier, and Berkeley belonged to the previous century, and writers such as Cudworth and Henry More seemed positively antiquated in their methods and interests in the 1820s. Furthermore, it was far from clear to an Englishman between 1810 and 1825 that German Idealism was a defined school of thought: the Idealists disagreed as much as they agreed. Coleridge was writing at a time when Schelling had changed radically the direction of his own thought and almost entirely stopped publishing. Coleridge could not simply *describe* the Platonist or mystical tradition that he loved, nor *expound* the German Idealism which he found so invigorating. These were rather the resources from which he could develop his ‘spiritual’ or ‘dynamic’ philosophy. The parameters of his religious thought are Idealistic: the primacy of subjectivity and spontaneity, the question of the absolute, intertwining of philosophy and theology, the philosophical interpretation of Christian dogma, Higher Criticism, and all-embracing ‘system’. The real nerve of Coleridge’s thought, however, lies – as he himself always claimed – in a Christian religious philosophy *Platonico more*. In his recent work Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann presents a fascinating depiction of the Christian-Platonic speculative tradition of philosophy stretching from Origen via Ficino to Schelling.¹⁰ This *perennial philosophy* is the broad context of Coleridge’s metaphysics. Yet this truth can be gravely misunderstood. Once we consider Coleridge’s detailed proposals, we can see that, despite certain affinities with the hermetic and esoteric tradition, Coleridge is within the mainstream of western thought and, in many respects, temperamentally averse to the more fantastical fringe of Platonism. Coleridge is a visionary philosopher, but a philosopher nonetheless.

A book about *Aids to Reflection* is faced with a serious structural problem. Coleridge changed his conception of the book during its printing and much of the subsequent reorganising of the text means that it is impossible to pursue exactly a continuous argument. Coleridge discusses some topics such as ‘language’, ‘nature’, or ‘spirit’ repeatedly with minor variations throughout the text. Coleridge does, however, specify his wish:

¹⁰ W. Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis. Historische Umrisse abendländischer Spiritualität in Antike, Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998).

1. To direct the Reader's attention to the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse . . .
 2. To establish the *distinct* characters of Prudence, Morality and Religion . . .
 3. To substantiate and set forth at large the momentous distinction between REASON and Understanding . . .
 4. To exhibit a full and consistent Scheme of the Christian dispensation . . .
- (*Aids*, pp. 6–9)

Correspondingly we shall discuss the general project of a spiritual philosophy in *Aids to Reflection* and then turn to the four specific issues above. We consider the idea of a spiritual philosophy and its intimate relation to the doctrine of the Trinity in the first chapter: 'The true philosopher is the lover of God.' Coleridge's spiritual philosophy is based upon a rejection of empiricism. Coleridge has a mystical conception of philosophy as reflection and experience, i.e. the bending of the soul back to God as its source. The context is to the Trinitarian–Unitarian controversy. This theological debate, we argue, is the key to understanding Coleridge's philosophical development and thought. Here we are confronted with the speculative or philosophical idea of the Trinity as the dynamic reflexive life of the absolute divine subject: as absolute *reflection* of the Father in the Son, and linked by the Spirit. If we combine the images implicit in the word 'reflection' of mirroring, bending back, and thought, we can see why the term is used in the Christian-Platonic tradition for the self-contemplation of the tri-une Godhead: the Son as the *image* of the Father, the Spirit bending back to the Father, and the relation of the persons as one of *self-contemplation*. With this conception of God as the hidden agenda of *Aids to Reflection*, we consider the four aims of the book:

1. The inner word: considers the first of Coleridge's aims: 'To direct the Reader's attention to the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse'. This is the question of reflection in the sense of *meditation* or introspection and the chapter explores Coleridge's use of aphorism and theory of language in relation to his logos metaphysics. Rigorous reflection upon *meaning* leads to the communicative aspect of the Godhead, the Word that is the *ineffable* source of all meaning.
2. The image of God: considers the relationship of ethics to religion: 'To establish the *distinct* characters of Prudence, Morality and Religion', and here the primary sense of reflection is the *optical* insofar as the genuine ethical agent *reflects* the divine in the *life* of the

spirit. True ethics, for Coleridge, is transformed into religion: the life of godliness is literally god-likeness.

3. God is truth: considers Coleridge's ontological theology: 'To substantiate and set forth at large the momentous distinction between REASON and Understanding'. Coleridge uses the Augustinian idea of God as *veritas*, and distinguishes divine reason from the *reflective*, i.e. understanding of the finite mind. This is a speculative theology that emphasises the limits of the unaided intellect. The renewal of the will is seen as the heart of genuine wisdom.

4. The great instauration: considers the essence of Christianity: 'To exhibit a full and consistent Scheme of the Christian dispensation'. There is a vision of the spiritual meaning of the dogmatic content of Christianity and especially the idea of the Trinity which envisages the essence of Christianity as consisting in the *conversion*, i.e. reflection of the soul through the indwelling Logos.

The final chapter of the vision of God elaborates upon Coleridge's view of freedom, education, and the clerisy, a 'permanent learned class'. It is appropriate because the book is directed at those who have 'dedicated their future lives to the cultivation of their Race, as Pastors, Preachers, Missionaries, or Instructors of Youth' (*Aids*, p. 6). The mystical vision which permeates Coleridge's thought is not primarily a punctual, individual ecstasy, but the source of principles of the humane social fabric. Coleridge is fond of the Biblical Proverb, 'WHERE NO VISION IS, THE PEOPLE PERISHETH' (Proverbs 29: 18) and relates this to his central distinction between reason and understanding (cf. *CCS*, p. 58).

In this manner we can see how Coleridge drew upon Platonic and Idealistic themes and ideas and produced a philosophy that came to influence the Victorians so powerfully and remains a source of inspiration for contemporary thought. The broad structure of the argument is as follows.

Coleridge is attacking what he perceives as the dominant forensic model of religion and ethics as presented by William Paley. Here Christianity consists of external evidences of the divine will, but Paley is quite sceptical about knowledge of the divine essence or nature. The Platonist and Idealist Coleridge is adamant that Christianity offers insight into the divine nature as goodness. In order to perceive this divine essence, the Christian must turn within, and not depend upon external facts such as miracles. By reflection upon the conditions of thought and language, Coleridge argues for a

spiritual transcendent ground: the divine logos as the basis of words, the intelligibility of being as the presupposition of communication. This constitutes a meditative component in Coleridge's thinking. The awakening of the mind leads to the issue of the good life. This is the imitation of the transcendent spiritual principle, and the ethical life is seen as an ascent to this principle. The possibility of science rests upon an essentially ethical and religious frame of mind, a discipline of the spirit and reverence for truth. Religion is the awareness of man's natural estrangement from the ground of being: his sinfulness. The Christian religion is the historical and symbolic expression of the return of finite beings to God. Christianity is the spiritual religion because it incarnates and enunciates an eternal intelligible principle: the dying and rising of the divine word.

We argue that Coleridge's rejection of voluntarism, and his Platonic insistence upon God as defined – even constrained – by the law of his goodness, help to explain his rejection of Schelling's philosophical theology, as well as his objection to Paley. It also helps explain, we shall argue, Coleridge's admiration for Kant – despite the latter's rather desiccated theology and rather attenuated vision of metaphysics. Schopenhauer remarked that Kant was like a man dancing at a ball with a masked lady, who takes off her mask to reveal his wife – and his wife is theology.¹¹ It is this aspect of Kant which illuminates Coleridge's fascination for his work. Kant's concept of autonomy is clearly incompatible with a God who is an arbitrary external force, as brute power; however, it is not clear that it is incompatible with the Christian Platonic view of ethics as participation in the archetypal goodness of the divine; a mirroring of the spirit.

This book is an attempt to revive the discredited thesis that Coleridge's close relationship to German Idealism was not merely derivative, but grounded upon the genuine affinity of Coleridge's Cambridge Platonism with the reflections of Schelling in his Munich period. Coleridge had a critical and creative relation to, and kinship with, German thought. Moreover, the principal impulse behind his engagement with that thought was the more immediate context of the English Unitarian–Trinitarian controversy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Über die Grundlage der Moral', Zürcher Ausgabe, *Werke in zehn Bänden* (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977), vol. vi. p. 209.

It might be assumed that *Aids* is merely a preparation for students, a set of exercises which should prepare the ground for Coleridge's genuine and substantial works. If this were true the *real* Coleridge is to be found in the manuscripts, and the *opus maximum*, and should reawaken those familiar complaints about why Coleridge was unable to fulfil his promises!

I wish to offer three arguments for the paramount importance of *Aids to Reflection* in the appreciation of Coleridge as a thinker. Firstly, Coleridge was a natural commentator, a scribbler of inspired marginalia. This suggests a crabbed and scholastic mind to many; but the apparent deference to the text masks an originality rarely to be found in English systematic statements of philosophico-theological principles. We should not believe that since *Aids* is about Robert Leighton or Jeremy Taylor it follows that here we cannot find in it the *authentic* Coleridge. Secondly, Coleridge's philosophical writings are not incidentally 'applied' philosophy. Like Plato, he believes fervently in the identity of knowledge and virtue, and it is quite appropriate that in his greatest work we should find 'exercises' rather than a store house or, worse, museum full of elaborate and unverifiable doctrines about the supersensible empyrean. Thirdly, *Aids to Reflection* marks Coleridge as a spiritual writer: 'Reason is preeminently spiritual, and a Spirit, even our Spirit, even *our* Spirit, through an effluence of the same grace by which we are privileged to say Our Father!' (*Aids*, p. 218). He wishes to speak to the heart, and it is clearly the product of his own experience as tormented by guilt and failure – a veritable wreck by worldly standards – and yet not losing his trust in providence, his Christian hope. The Pauline tenet of 'gain through loss', paradoxical to the materialist, is his own bitter and liberating insight. And this explains the repeated polemic against any merely juridical theology; towards systems delineating what Christ has done *for* mankind. For Coleridge the essence of Christianity lies in the Christ *in* mankind, and the spiritual meaning of salvation is the realisation of the divine image and purpose, a Pauline 'living through dying' which necessarily clashes with crude conceptions of a cosmic *suum cuique*.

Once we see *Aids to Reflection* as a collection of spiritual exercises, a Christian-Platonic ascent of the mind to God, we can see that here we find not a late theological aberration, full of absent-minded philosophical forays, tedious sentimental piety, and abstruse arguments with deceased divines, but the most trenchant and characteristic expression of Coleridge's mind.

CHAPTER I

*The true philosopher is the lover of God: Coleridge's spiritual philosophy of religion*¹

God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3: 14)

The Trinity means the divine mystery: the content is mystical, i.e. speculative. (Hegel)²

It is the doctrine of the tri-unity that connects Xty with Philosophy . . . (Coleridge, *Notebooks* iv. 486o)

Coleridge repeatedly asserts that the essential ideas that interested him in Schelling were known to him through the English Platonic tradition. This claim has led scholars to scrutinise Coleridge's contact with Neoplatonic philosophy before his visit to Germany in 1798–99. Generally scholars have concluded that Coleridge is lying or they are forced to claim a depth of study and insight that is barely supported by the evidence of his notebooks and letters. Wellek argued that Coleridge has no sense of the incompatibility of his seventeenth-century English sources and German Idealism:

a storey from Kant, there a part of a room from Schelling, there a roof from Anglican theology and so on. The architect did not feel the clash of styles, the subtle and irreconcilable differences between the Kantian first floor and the Anglican roof. Coleridge's 'untenable architectonic', and his inability 'to construct a philosophy of his own . . . drove him into a fatal dualism of a philosophy of faith, which amounted to an intellectual justification of this bankruptcy of thought.'³

Norman Fruman attacks the claim that Coleridge felt a genial affinity with Schelling by remarking that the 'specific influence from

¹ Augustine, *City of God*, translated by H. Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), §8, 10: 'verus philosophus est amator Dei'; cf. *Aids*, p. 41.

² 'Die Dreieinigkeit heißt das Mysterium Gottes; der Inhalt ist mystisch, d.h. spekulative.' *Vorlesung über die Philosophie der Religion* iii., edited by G. Lasson (Hamburg: Meiner, 1966), p. 69. cf. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by P. C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), vol. iii. pp. 280–3.

³ R. Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England 1793–1838* (Princeton University Press, 1931) pp. 67–9.

antiquity or the Neoplatonists consists of scraps and tatters'.⁴ Our counter thesis is that Wellek and Frumann are mistaken. Coleridge's claim is ingenuous and his achievement ingenious. The post-Kantians revived the doctrine of the Trinity in a philosophical manner. The sources of this revival rest ultimately in Neoplatonism and especially via the Cambridge and Florentine forms of Christian Neoplatonism. If we take seriously Coleridge's early and entirely earnest involvement in Unitarianism and his particular admiration for Priestley, together with his early interest in Ralph Cudworth, we may construe Coleridge's remarks about his sense of déjà vu in German metaphysics quite intelligibly without recourse to the view that Coleridge is dissimulating. He is, of course, notoriously inaccurate about a number of issues concerning his biography.⁵ Nonetheless, it is possible to reconstruct his meaning without being either unduly sceptical or fanciful.

Coleridge's assertion in the *Biographia Literaria* that he was Trinitarian 'ad normam Platonis' before he became a Trinitarian in religion is enigmatic. It is hard to explain why Coleridge himself should come to see his own biography as the move from a Platonic Trinity to the Christian Trinity. This is mysterious because even the most allegorical interpreter of Plato's *Timaeus* or *Parmenides* is hard pressed to find direct analogies. Even if one takes the 'ad normam Platonis' to be a reference to the three hypostases of Neoplatonism, the tag remains opaque. The Neoplatonic triad of τὸ εἶν--ὁ νοῦς--ἡ ψυχὴ is not, in the manner of the Christian Trinity, consubstantial, and there has been no explanation of what Coleridge meant by his move from being a *philosophical* Trinitarian to being a *religious* Trinitarian. Some scholars have evaded the issue entirely: most notably McFarland who claims: 'The Trinity . . . [is] suspended in its mystery both One and Many.'⁶

Significantly, we have an important clue as to Coleridge's meaning. He claims that, as in Augustine's case, the 'libri . . . Platoniorum' helped him towards his reconversion to Trinitarian Christianity. In an age when philosophy has become self-consciously secular, it is hard to appreciate the theological parameters of much

⁴ N. Frumann, *Coleridge: The Damaged Archangel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), p. 174.

⁵ cf. E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a Biographical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1938), p. 1.

⁶ T. McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p. 229.