

The Form of Transformed Vision

Coleridge and the Knowledge of God

James S. Cutsinger

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Contents

Part I

The Form of Transformed Vision

- 1 Mental Power**
- 2 Coleridge's *Via Media***

Part II

Coleridgean Unity

- 3 The Omnipresence of All in Each**
- 4 Materialism**
- 5 Interpenetration**
- 6 Translucence**

Part III

The Knowledge of God

- 7 A New Inwardness**
- 8 God without Place**

Preface

This book intends to make two beginnings. Because they are so closely related, it has not seemed necessary in the organization of the book itself to distinguish them by separate or consecutive treatments. The reader will find himself confronted with a single problem and will be drawn, it is hoped, into sympathy with a unified solution. And yet, in order to avoid any confusion that might result from this procedure, it seems wise to open our discussion by first calling attention to the distinct, though not divided, goals I have in mind.

On the one hand, this book is an attempt to lay the foundation, though no more than that, for a fresh understanding of the knowledge of God. The problem facing those who wish to speak of such knowledge today is a problem created largely, I believe, by the pressures of empiricism, by the nearly unanimous assumption of contemporary thinkers that human knowledge is limited to the world perceived by the physical senses. The knowledge of God implies the presence of at least two elements: an element of continuity and an element of discontinuity. Whatever else it may involve and however its distinguishing characteristics are described, knowledge means relationship: a relationship, bond, or bridge between a knowing subject and a known object. On the other hand, whatever else God may be, however his nature is described, whether by those who acknowledge his existence or those who do not, God means essentially something greater: something more powerful, more fundamental, more valuable, more worthy of love and fear than anything else—"something than which nothing greater can be conceived," as St. Anselm would have it. There is in the meaning of God, therefore, a necessary element of distance or otherness, of *tremendum*, an element intrinsically inconsonant with the connections and bonds usually supposed by knowledge and running against the current of our usual cognitions. Thus, to speak of the knowledge of God is at once to support and to resist conjunction, and to require the preservation of both the continuous and the separate, what the Platonists call the same and the other, the *idem* and *alter*. The unity of human knowing and true divinity cannot survive apart from this minimal requirement.

Yet the actualization of this required unity has been all but destroyed by the modern

theologian's unexamined and, as I shall argue, unnecessary deference to the cognitive limitations imposed by empiricistic epistemologies. Such unquestioning deference can be seen in the work both of theologians normally associated with what we might call the more liberal persuasions, whose concepts of God tend in the direction of immanence and availability, and of theologians whose positions one would usually call conservative, who characteristically emphasize the divine transcendence or sovereignty. In each case, we find that a sacrifice has often been made: for the first, a sacrifice of discontinuity and full divinity; for the second, a sacrifice of continuity and real knowledge. The first have forgotten that if God in his *absoluteness* were ever fully to enter the world, our very existence, let alone our efforts to know him, would be shattered. The second, on the other hand, seem to have neglected the divine *infinity*, the equally important fact, not only that nothing can be apart from God, but that nothing apart from God can be. In each case, it is empiricism and the empirical world of material objects that have made these sacrifices seem essential and that help account for the neglect of God's two most essential attributes. For physical objects, extended substances with solid surfaces, can never permit the full conjunction of the same and the other that religious knowledge demands, and their residue or aftereffects in a mind dominated by the empiricist's assumptions inevitably provoke the suspicion, sooner or later, that such knowledge is impossible.

It has been my aim throughout the following chapters and in pursuit of a theology firmly grounded in the *knowledge of God*, in both knowledge and divinity, to set a course between the liberal and conservative, between their mutual exclusions, and to do so by describing the form of a knowledge deeper than that which empirical surfaces and material divisions allow. Thus we come to my second beginning. For in setting this constructive course, and in sketching this essential form, I have found it useful to make of this book an interpretive exercise as well and to produce what I hope is a fresh interpretation of a most remarkable, though neglected, thinker. Hence my subtitle, and hence the importance to our constructive task of the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), a man whose philosophy seems especially created for those in search of a theological *via media*. Indeed, in my own case, the need for a new and more balanced method and my search for the "extra-empirical" means of seeing synoptically the continuous and the separate can be traced to Coleridge himself and to my growing

awareness that in his vision there exist extraordinarily valuable resources for those who wish to train their minds to think beyond the boundaries of matter. In order to make my first explicitly theological and *constructive* beginning, I have therefore found it helpful to make an *interpretive* start with regard to Coleridgean thought as well.

I said that Coleridge is important to those who would train their minds. The idea of mental training should be underscored before proceeding, for it supplies the connecting link between my goals. The cultivation of an intellectual regimen, combined with specific exercises for the strengthening and toning of mental muscles, is essential to both the Coleridgean method and the pursuit of our two beginnings. It is for this reason that I have attempted to make of this book an argument and not just a description or interpretation. Indeed, what interpretation there is has the sole purpose of furthering the argument. Anyone who supposes this book to be primarily about Coleridge would be well advised to close it immediately, for my intention is to look not *at* but *through* the Coleridgean system and beyond it, and to provoke my readers into doing so as well.

Interpretation of course remains, if a subordinate, then still a necessary aspect of the present enterprise, and a few words about the interpretation of Coleridge are therefore in order. It should be said first that the Coleridgean scholar today must be more than a student of poetry and English literature or of literary criticism. For in a way never required before, even during Coleridge's own lifetime, the interpreter is asked to acknowledge with a continually increasing frequency and amazement the formidable range and depth of Coleridge's many-sided thought, as notebooks, letters, marginalia, and other hitherto unpublished manuscripts are being brought before the public eye for the first time. The continuing publication of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, under the general editorship of Kathleen Coburn, is going far toward supplementing both her own edition of the *Notebooks* and Earl Leslie Griggs's edition of the *Collected Letters* and thus toward greatly enhancing the intellectual reputation of the already famous author of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan". It is certainly an auxiliary aim of mine to help extend the growing appreciation of this myriad-minded man, the new appreciation especially of his philosophical and theological significance for the modern period as a whole.

I have aimed especially to stress the unity and metaphysical principles behind the

great diversity of his thinking. The student of Coleridge knows well with what incredible persistence this philosopher and poet emphasized, as the guiding theme and chief object of his thought, the transformation of one's vision. Coleridge had seen the world anew, and he wished his interlocutors and readers to share that vision through the development of their own powers of reflection. The student remembers, too, the unparalleled importance Coleridge attached throughout his work to the quest for unity and to the oneness of subject and object, self and other, one and many, sameness and difference, *idem* and *alter*. But studies of Coleridge have not reflected as fully as they might what I believe is the essential, vital relationship between these facets of his thought, between his transformation and his unity. It has been my goal here, therefore, to promote a fuller and more decisive recognition of this important connection and to show that the precise intellectual method and reflective exercises by which Coleridge would have us approach his vision are consciously designed to awaken our unconscious or latent capacity for seeing true unity. Unity, it must be recognized, is the very form of transformation.

My efforts to expose this form have made it necessary to attempt a somewhat different study from those conducted in the past. Perhaps the most common productions in Coleridgean scholarship have been the examinations of his sources, studies prompted, no doubt, not only by the problem of Coleridge's controversial "plagiarisms", but also by the more general and more generally agreed-upon fact of his great debt to German idealism and Romanticism. It must be emphasized at the outset, however, that this book intends in no way to be a study of sources. It has been assumed that the reader can go elsewhere with much greater profit if his concern is primarily for the great *mélange* of Platonism, German idealism, seventeenth-century English theology, Renaissance alchemy, and so forth that supplied so much of Coleridge's vocabulary. I have also assumed that no matter what the specific sources of this vocabulary, the truly important point for our purposes is what the words actually say in their present context, whatever their meaning in the work of other authors. I should add, too, that I have not been concerned with Coleridge *as* a source—as the important fountainhead that he was, for example, for much of nineteenth-century English religious thought.

But neither have I aimed to examine Coleridge in a doctrinal, ideological, or discipline-oriented way. Among the most comprehensive surveys of this sort are

undoubtedly John H. Muirhead's older book *Coleridge as Philosopher* and Owen Barfield's comparatively recent *What Coleridge Thought*. Each of these studies, as Barfield's title suggests, gives its reader valuable insights into the content of the Coleridgean philosophy in all its many branches and treats it, one might say, as a body of doctrine or teaching. A similar procedure is involved, though on a more limited scale of course, in those works that have been devoted to analyzing, not Coleridge's philosophy as a whole, but his religious thought, as is the case in James Boulger's *Coleridge as Religious Thinker*, J. Robert Barth's *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, and Stephen Happell's *Coleridge's Religious Imagination*.

Like these last three studies, the focus of this book is predominantly theological; I am interested in Coleridge's religious thinking. But unlike them, and unlike the works of Muirhead and Barfield, this study is concerned, not so much with *what* Coleridge thought, as with *how* he thought. What makes Coleridge's thinking so valuable to theology and to western religious thought in general is not, I believe, his specific estimations and understandings of particular philosophical problems and individual doctrinal issues, but rather what I have called his *form*, and what he preferred to call his "method". It is the form of the unity he sees, and the unified balance his words achieve in their struggle to mirror that unity, which can be to us, I believe, of the greatest constructive value.

My purpose has therefore been to penetrate the boundaries between distinct vocabularies, distinct problems, and distinct doctrines in order to come as close as possible to the deep experiential source of Coleridge's religious thought. It has been my aim to read Coleridge synthetically, to see the literary critic, the historian, the political columnist, the amateur chemist, botanist, and biologist, the grammarian, the psychoanalyst, the metaphysician and epistemologist, the poet, the linguist, and (always) the omnivorous reader and loquacious talker—to see them all as *one* Coleridge, and to do so by developing a sensitivity to the basic shape and persistent, interdisciplinary movement of his ever-fascinated, and ever fascinating, mind. For in seeing *Coleridge* as one, we begin to see also the unity of what *he* saw, and we begin to sense the experiential fullness and comprehensiveness that supported and enhanced his understanding of religious truth. As J. Robert Barth has observed: "For him, all knowledge is ultimately one, whether it be

scientific, poetic, philosophical, or religious, and the capstone of all knowledge for him is knowledge of God.”¹ Basil Willey adds, “The quest for religious truth and the establishment of religious faith formed the master current of his life, to which all his other myriad interests were but tributary rills.”² It is with this experiential and interdisciplinary background in mind that my use and implied use of the words *religion* and *theology*, as well as the knowledge of God toward which I aim, should be understood throughout.

It is in keeping with this background, too, that the Coleridge scholar may understand the Coleridgean beginning I hope to have made. In my search for the fundamental vision beneath the doctrines, I have largely set aside and postponed any direct treatment of Coleridge’s later and more explicitly theological work. The period with which I have dealt primarily is that of what is sometimes called the “middle” Coleridge—the Coleridge who had abandoned the Unitarian religion and Hartleyan psychology of his young adulthood, but not yet the full-fledged Trinitarian Sage of Highgate—the period of his intellectual life circumscribed, very roughly, by the dictation of his “literary life and opinions”, the *Biographia Literaria*, in 1815 and his composition of the *Aids to Reflection* in 1824. Though I have made use of materials from letters and notebooks of Coleridge extending beyond, and especially before, this middle period, the greatest weight falls between these dates, if not on the Sage, then on the Prophet, perhaps, of Calne and Ashley Cottage—here where one first begins to sense the pattern of thinking, the distinctive *form*, that would later carry Coleridge through the *Aids* and into the Trinitarian speculations of the fragmentary *Opus Maximum* and his other late and overtly doctrinal theology. This book has been governed by a special attention, therefore, in addition to that directed toward the *Biographia Literaria* and the *Aids to Reflection*, to “The Statesman’s Manual”, the first of the *Lay Sermons*, published in 1816; to the posthumously published essay “Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life”, written in 1816; to the 1818 “*rifacciamento*” of his periodical *The Friend*; to *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, delivered in 1818; to the fourth volume of *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1815-1819); and to the

¹ J. Robert Barth, S. J., *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 11.

² Basil Willey, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 11.

third volume of *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1808-1819).

In all of these texts, as I hope to show, there is both form and transformation. Above all, there is the endeavor to preserve the balance of one in many and of *idem* and *alter*, a balance with the power to aid in bridging the seeming gulf between the merely continuous and the wholly separate, and to aid us thus in knowing God. For no matter his apparent subject, Coleridge was always concerned with this very knowledge and with setting a course, therefore, like that which theology seems today so much in need of: a course true to both God and human knowing and avoiding alike the opposites of liberal and conservative, which too often divide them. “To expose the inconsistency of both these extremes,” writes Coleridge, “and by inference to recommend that state of mind”—that form of vision—“which looks forward to ‘*the fellowship of the mystery of the faith as a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the KNOWLEDGE of God, the eyes of the UNDERSTANDING being enlightened*’—this,” our Prophet announces, “formed my GENERAL purpose.”³ This forms also the general purpose of the present book.

³ “The Statesman’s Manual” in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, Vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 46.