

COLERIDGE, OPIUM, AND THEOLOGY

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THE geographical distribution of religions has been expounded by more than one writer, whilst a physical basis, resulting from health or illness of individuals, has not escaped attention. In the instance of Coleridge, there is an example of the last category, combined with an illustration of the influence of drugs.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge presumably adopted Unitarian or Socinian views when a student at Cambridge. The by-laws of Christ's Hospital, which he entered in 1782, the same year as Charles Lamb, although Lamb's senior by three years, demanded baptized membership of the Church of England as a passport for admission, as did the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, or, in the case of the Universities, subscription to the thirty-nine Articles, which amounted to practically the same condition. We know from a letter which the father of Charles Lloyd wrote to his son, Robert, that Coleridge was educated "for a clergyman, but for conscience sake declined that office." In May, 1793, William Frend, a Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, was tried in the Vice-Chancellor's Court for having given utterance to Liberal views in politics and Unitarian opinions in theology. Coleridge, then an undergraduate, and, in everything but mathematics, the earnest disciple of Frend, made himself dangerously conspicuous at that trial. Gunning, in his *Reminiscences*, relates an incident in connection therewith which does not show Coleridge in a very favorable light. The Senior Proctor had marked a man in the front row of the gallery who was particularly distinguishing himself by applauding. This was Coleridge, who, perceiving that the Proctor had noticed him and was making his way towards the gallery, turned round to the person who was standing behind him and made an offer of changing places, which was gladly accepted by the unsuspecting man. Coleridge immediately withdrew and, mixing with the crowd, escaped suspicion. Although the other

man was enabled to prove his innocence, this conduct on the part of Coleridge was severely censured by the undergraduates, as it was quite clear that, to escape punishment himself, he would have subjected an innocent man to rustication or expulsion. Gunning, however, omits to mention that Coleridge afterwards made confession to the Proctor and was forgiven.

Coleridge left Cambridge in 1794, without proceeding to a degree and, in the following year, he delivered a course of theological lectures at Bristol on "Revealed Religion, its Corruptions and its Political Views," which proved very successful. Whether, and how far, he was influenced by Priestley's *Discourses on Revealed Religion*, published in 1794, cannot be ascertained, but the following is the prospectus of Coleridge's course:

These Lectures are intended for two classes of men—Christians and Infidels: for the former that they may be able to give a reason for the hope that is in them; for the latter that they may not determine against Christianity, or arguments applicable to its corruptions only.

The subjects of the first lecture are: The Origin of Evil. The Necessity of Revelation deduced from the Nature of Man. An Examination and Defence of the Mosaic Dispensation.

Second: The Sects of Philosophy and the Popular Superstitions of the Gentile World, from the earliest times to the birth of Christ.

Third: Concerning the time of the appearance of Christ. Internal Evidences of Christianity. External Evidences of Christianity.

Fourth: The External Evidences of Christianity continued. Answers to Popular and Philosophical Objections.

Fifth: The Corruptions of Christianity not dangerous. Political application.

Sixth: The grand political views of Christianity—far beyond every Religion and even Sects of Philosophy. The friend of Civil Freedom. The probable state of Societies and Government if all men were Christians.

Tickets to be had at Mr. Cottle, Bookseller.

It was certainly a very bold syllabus and, apart from the cursory treatment necessitated by the limited duration of public lectures, it seems hardly possible for justice to have been done to such important questions by a student fresh from the University and of only twenty-two years of age. Emboldened by the success which attended this effort, Coleridge gave a course of lectures on political subjects in Bristol later on in the same year.

About this time, Coleridge seems to have made the acquaintance of Dr. J. Prior Estlin, a renowned Unitarian minister at Bristol, who is believed to have exercised considerable influence over Coleridge. A correspondence between the twain began in January, 1796, and continued until April, 1814, when an estrangement took place. This severance of friendship could not have been the outcome of any change in Coleridge's theological views, which, as will be seen, had taken place some years previously, but, in all probability, was, as Henry A. Bright (who collated and published the letters through the Philo-Biblon Society), suggests, "owing less to divergence in their opinions than to the fact that Coleridge's growing habit of opium taking, joined to an absolute recklessness in incurring debts and in failing to fulfil his obligations had, at this time, entirely alienated Doctor Estlin's sympathy and respect."

From the platform Coleridge went to the pulpit, and, although afterwards more successful, his first attempts at preaching do not appear to have been very brilliant. Cottle heard his first and second sermons and has left on record a very vivid description of them in his *Reminiscences*. Coleridge had no chance of a pulpit in Bristol, in consequence of his very pronounced political utterances at the lectures he had delivered, but an invitation was sent to him to preach a trial sermon at Bath, where a vacancy was about to occur. Coleridge, however, caused annoyance at the outset by refusing to don the customary pulpit gown and he appeared before the congregation wearing a blue coat and a white waistcoat. There were only a very few people in the congregation and the number diminished considerably before the discourse, which was on the iniquity of the Corn Laws, was brought to a conclusion. It was practically the same lecture he had delivered not long before at Bristol, and which had caused much debate and contention. He preached again in the afternoon, selecting again a political subject—the Hair Powder Tax, and this also was a repetition of a Bristol lecture. There were seventeen people in the chapel when he began, but only two or three had the patience to remain throughout the discourse. When he had lectured on this subject only a few days previously he kept the audience in good feeling by the happy combination of wit, humor, and argument. Cottle came to the conclusion that Coleridge had mistaken his calling and he says that his personal regard for him was too genuine to entertain the wish of ever again seeing him in the pulpit. Coleridge, however, seems quickly to have become an acceptable preacher and Hazlitt gives an interesting account of his extraordi-

nary powers of extempore speech in the pulpit and, shortly after the incident just recorded, Coleridge wrote to Dr. Prior Estlin :

I preached yesterday morning from Hebrews iv. 1 and 2. 'Twas my *chef d'oeuvre*. I think of writing it down and publishing it with two other sermons, one on the character of Christ, and another on his universal reign, from Isaiah xlv. 22, 3. I should like you to hear me preach them. I lament that my political notoriety prevents me relieving you occasionally at Bristol.

Apparently the Unitarian views of Coleridge were not deep-rooted, for Cottle says that, in February, 1798, he "held, though loosely, the doctrines of Socinus." But when, about this time, Mr. Rowe, the Unitarian minister of Shrewsbury, settled in Bristol, Coleridge was strongly recommended to offer himself for the vacant pastorate. He had preached at Nottingham, Taunton, and elsewhere, and had met with a very favorable reception. He accordingly decided to become a candidate for the Shrewsbury vacancy and went there on probation. There he met William Hazlitt, with whose parents he lodged during his stay in the Salopian capital. Shortly before this, however, Thomas Poole had introduced Coleridge to the Wedgwoods and the two brothers, Thomas and Josiah, had formed a high opinion of his talents and assumed an interest in his welfare. They came to the conclusion that if Coleridge accepted the Shrewsbury appointment, which was offered definitely to him, and which his Bristol and Shrewsbury friends were urging him to accept, his services to literature would be lost. They, therefore, offered him instead an allowance of £100 a year. After a short consideration, Coleridge declined the brothers' offer, but when they increased that offer to £150 he immediately accepted it, giving his reasons in detail in a letter to Dr. Prior Estlin. He seems, however, almost immediately to have regretted his decision or to have retained a hankering after the pulpit, for on 18th February, 1798, he wrote, in a postscript to Cottle :

This week I purpose offering myself to the Bridgewater Socinian congregation as assistant minister without any salary, directly or indirectly ; but of this say not a word to anyone, unless you see Mr. Estlin.

In the same month, a letter was written by Theophilus Lindsey to a friend at Shrewsbury, in which occurs the passage :

You cannot well conceive how much you have raised my opinion of Mr. Coleridge by your account of him. Such shining lights, so virtuous and disinterested, will contribute to redeem the age we live in from being so destitute of apostolic zeal.

Coleridge was always of a restless disposition, but the year 1803 marks the beginning of a distinct deterioration in his character. It was in that year he became addicted to the use of a quack medicine known as the "Kendal Black Drop," into the constitution of which opium or laudanum seems to have entered. The use of the concoction seems to have produced a temporary relief from suffering, but it was, in reality, the beginning of a slavery. E. H. Coleridge thinks he must have resorted occasionally to opiates, before 1796 even, at the latter end of which year he wrote to Poole that he was taking twenty-five drops of laudanum every five hours. In an unpublished letter to his brother George, dated 21st November, 1791, he says: "Opium never used to have any disagreeable effects on me," but by the spring of 1801 he had become more or less a regular drug-taker. In 1802 he justified or found excuses for the habit in a letter to his wife and, according to this letter, he indulged in the habit with the knowledge and approval of T. Wedgwood. For a time, however, he substituted ether for opium and laudanum, though he regarded opium as less pernicious than beer, wine, spirits, or any fermented liquor. At a much later date, he, in his own words, recalled "with a bitter smile, a laugh of gall and bitterness, this period of unsuspecting delusion." Nor was he able to escape from the maelstrom until a time when, he said, "the current was already beyond my strength to stem." It was only with the assistance of others that some measure of liberation from the servitude was gained and the effect upon his mental and moral powers was as inimical as upon the physical. His conduct previously had been somewhat erratic, but not inconsistent with genius, and, whatever changes or development might be observable, could be traced to his reading and the application, after consideration, more or less mature. As, however, his passion for drugs developed into an obsession, the more violent became the changes in his opinions and expressions until they culminated in the most extravagant Evangelicalism, and that of an unfavorable type, because it is invariably, as it was in the case of Coleridge, accompanied by intolerance. He seems also to have become destitute, save for occasional lucid intervals, of the qualities of affection and courtesy, often towards his friends, all of whom, with the exception, perhaps, of his brother-in-law, Southey, were willing and anxious to remain in that category. The story of his decline and fall has been told in detail in the many biographies that have been written. It was related at a later period in deep shame and penitence by Coleridge himself.

The turn of the tide is first observed, so far as published documents are concerned, in December, 1802, in a letter written to Dr. Prior Estlin, where he describes the Quakers and the Unitarians as the only Christians, altogether pure from idolatry, although he goes on to doubt whether the Unitarians are entirely free from guilt in that respect, since "even the worship of the one God becomes idolatry, in my convictions, when, instead of the Eternal and Omnipresent, in whom we live and move and have our being, we set up a distinct Jehovah, tricked out in anthropomorphic attributes of time." But, although he approved entirely and accepted the *religion* of the Quakers, he denounced the *sect* and their own notions of their own religion.

His slavery to opium and laudanum became more and more a reality and, in 1807, he conveyed, in a personal interview, the impression that he had given up all hope of ever liberating himself from the bondage. He condemned the publication by De Quincey of his *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, urging that he had never aggravated the act of indulgence by publication of the fact.

It was in the same year that Coleridge told Cottle that "he had renounced all his Unitarian sentiments, that he considered Unitarianism as a heresy of the worst description, attempting in vain to reconcile sin and holiness, the world and heaven, opposing the whole spirit of the Bible, and subversive of all that truly constituted Christianity." At that interview, says Cottle, he professed his deepest conviction of the truth of Revelation, of the Fall of Man, of the Divinity (presumably he meant Deity) of Christ, and of redemption alone through his blood. Cottle, who was himself a pronounced Evangelical, said that to hear those sentiments so explicitly avowed gave him unspeakable pleasure and formed a new, unexpected, and stronger bond of union. At that time, however, Cottle did not know of Coleridge's addiction to opium. He did not learn the fact until seven years later, which is somewhat strange, seeing that it was known to all the other friends of Coleridge, and Cottle was intimate with him from 1795 to 1796, and again in 1807, as stated above. In a letter to Cottle, also in 1807, Coleridge wrote that Socinianism, which was misnamed Unitarianism, was not only not Christianity, since it did not *reliqiate*, or bind anew, and he rejoiced to have escaped from its sophistries.

Coleridge's change of opinions does not seem to have improved his manners, according to an incident which is better given in Cottle's own words:

At this time I was invited to meet Mr. Coleridge with a zealous Unitarian minister. It was natural to conclude that such uncongenial, and, at the same time, such inflammable materials would soon ignite. The subject of Unitarianism having been introduced soon after dinner, the minister avowed his sentiments, in language that was construed into a challenge, when Mr. Coleridge advanced to the charge by saying, "Sir, you give up so much that the little you retain of Christianity is not worth keeping." We looked in vain for a reply. After a manifest internal conflict, the Unitarian minister prudently allowed the gauntlet to remain undisturbed. Wine, he thought more pleasant than controversy.

Such conduct on the part of Coleridge would be considered by many as a breach of good manners. Later, he behaved in a similar way to Emerson. When the great American essayist visited him in 1833, Coleridge at once burst into a declaration on the folly and ignorance of Unitarianism and its high unreasonableness, nor was he the least perturbed when Emerson felt bound to tell him that he was born and bred a Unitarian, a fact that was, of course, known to Coleridge. De Quincey tells us that Coleridge said it had cost him a painful effort, but not a moment's hesitation, to abjure his Unitarianism, from the circumstance that he had among the Unitarians many friends, to some of whom he was greatly indebted for great kindness. In particular, he mentioned Dr. Prior Estlin of Bristol. The cleavage in his relationships with Doctor Estlin did not take place until seven years after Coleridge had publicly abjured Unitarianism.

It must be related, to the credit of Coleridge, that he made many attempts, though with varying and always temporary success, to escape from the thralldom of drug-taking. On 3rd December, 1808, he wrote to Doctor Estlin detailing the attempts he had made to break off the habit and stating that he had reduced the dose to one-sixth part of what formerly he took. Then he continued:

I have no immediate motive to detail to you the tenets in which we differ. Indeed, the difference is not so great as you have been led to suppose and is rather philosophical than theological. I believe the Father of all to be the only object of adoration or prayer. The Calvinistic tenet of a *vicarious* satisfaction I reject not without some horror and though I believe that the redemption by Christ implies more than what the Unitarians understand by the phrase, yet I use it rather as a X, Y, Z, an unknown quantity, than as words to which I pretend to annex clear notions. I believe that in the salvation of man a spiritual process *sui generis* is required, a spiritual aid and agency, the

nature of which I am wholly ignorant of, as a *cause*, and only perfectly apprehend it from its necessity and its facts.

This letter read in conjunction with his communication to Cottle and his intercourse with the unnamed Unitarian minister causes one to wonder whether, after all, the assertion of some of his biographers that Coleridge was "all things to all men," was not correct.

In 1810, Coleridge again succumbed to the domination of opium. He joined his wife and children at Keswick, remaining there for about five months, with a resultant restoration, said his wife, of good health, spirits, and humor. Relapse followed relapse, however, until 1813, by which time he had fallen into a deplorable mental, physical, and financial condition, which lasted until 1816, when he placed himself voluntarily under the care of Doctor Gillman at Highgate.

The break with Doctor Estlin came in 1813 and was directly the outcome of a lecture Coleridge delivered at Bristol at a time when his health was utterly broken and his nerves shattered. A numerous audience attended the lecture, in the course of which, Coleridge, in a reference to *Paradise Regained*, said that Milton had clearly represented Satan as a "sceptical Socinian." The offence was aggravated in a letter to Cottle when he said that Satan's faith somewhat exceeded that of the Socinians.

Remorse and despondency followed, as happen invariably after severe indulgence in opium, and, in December, 1813, Coleridge wrote to Joseph Wade of Bristol, asking him to request the prayers of Mr. Roberts, a Nonconformist minister of the same city, "for my infirm and wicked heart; that Christ may mediate to the Father to lead me to Christ, and give me a *living* instead of a *reasoning* faith." His last letter, written in an apologetic strain, to Doctor Estlin, is dated 9th April, 1814. Whether answered or not is unknown, but there does not appear to have been any resumption of friendship or communication, and three years later Doctor Estlin passed away. In the same year (1814, 26th June), Coleridge wrote to Joseph Wade:

In the one crime of OPIUM, what crime have I not made myself guilty of!—Ingratitude to my Maker! and to my benefactors—injustice! and *unnatural cruelty to my poor children!*—self-contempt for my repeated promises—breach, nay, too often actual falsehood.

Coleridge maintained his bitter invective against Unitarianism to the end. Writing in March, 1832, two years before the final scene in his life, to Miss Lawrence, he described God, as imagined by the

Unitarians, to be a sort of law-giving God of gravitation, to whom prayer would be as idle as to the law of gravity. Yet in a letter to Doctor Estlin on 7th December, 1802, he rejoiced in the numerous congregations of Deists, whom he had heard, existed in America, for, he said, "surely religious Deism is infinitely nearer the religion of our Savior than the gross idolatry of Popery, or the more decorous, but not less genuine idolatry of a vast number of Protestants."

There is much to be said in extenuation of Coleridge's addiction to opium, from which he was never wholly emancipated. Neither idleness nor sensual indulgence, but disease, drove him to the habit. The post-mortem examination of his remains revealed the fact that he suffered from a complaint which, as was afterwards demonstrated in an article in the *Lancet*, explained both his indolence and opium habit, and his enfeeblement of will may be attributed to this physical defect.