'The Cause of Religion':

Coleridge's Dissenting Ministry 1794-8

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PhD Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores the theme of ministry in the work and life of Coleridge in the period 1794-8. Coleridge's ministry comprises three elements, all of which underwent profound changes in the period: his conception of religion, of himself as a minister, and of his audience or congregation. By examining these three aspects of Coleridge's development together, a detailed picture emerges of the interrelationship between Coleridge's religious thought, writing, and practise. The interplay of these perspectives has yet to receive detailed critical attention.

The thesis is broadly chronological, beginning with an exploration of Coleridge's ill-fated Pantisocracy, and ending with the pamphlet *Fears in Solitude* written straight after Coleridge had rejected a position as a Unitarian minister. Throughout this period, Coleridge attempted to define both 'ministry' and 'religion' in order to rally his various projects together into a coherent and responsive defence of Christianity. The range of forms Coleridge's ministry took is therefore given sustained attention, critically examining the implications of his choice to deliver lectures, preach sermons, and to publish poetry and a political journal.

The influence of Unitarianism forms a considerable focus in the thesis, and I argue that it has tended to be critically misrepresented as a uniformly radical sect. By exploring the specific conditions in which Coleridge preached, and the responses to his performances, a picture emerges of the diversity he encountered within dissent. The thesis also makes detailed analysis of the way in which Coleridge attempted to relate his theological outlook to the dramatic political changes that occurred during the period.

Contents

List of Illustrations

All photographs by Jonathan Thorpe except for 3, taken from www.aboutdarwin.com.

Abbreviations

Coleridge

The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, general ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols (Routledge and Kegan Paul: Princeton University Press, 1969-2001)

BL	*Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (1983)
EOT	*Essays on his Times in The Morning Post and The Courier*, ed. David V. Erdman (1978)
Friend	*The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (1969)
LPR	*Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, eds. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (1973)
LS	*Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White (1972)
Marginalia	*Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson (1980-2001)
PW	*Poetical Works: Part 1. Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. J. C. C. Mays and J. Crick (2001)
SWF	*Shorter Works and Fragments*, ed. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson (1995)
TT	*Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (1990)
TW	*The Watchman*, ed. Lewis Patton (1970)

1796	*Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Cottle, 1796; Woodstock, 1990)
1797	*Poems by S. T. Coleridge: Second Edition* (London: Cottle, 1797; Woodstock, 1997)
CL	*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71)

CN *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols (London: Routledge,1957-2002)

Keach *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997)

Joseph Priestley

Unless otherwise marked, the following edition of Priestley's writings has been used:

The Theological and Miscellaneous Works &c. Of Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S &c. in Twenty-Five Volumes, edited with notes by John Towill Rutt (London: [n. pub.], 1817-1832)

Citations will take the form *Rutt* vol., page number. In the following cases the abbreviation will be used, omitting the volume number:

Journals

CB *The Coleridge Bulletin*

HLQ *Huntington Library Quarterly*

MLR *The Modern Language Review*

N&Q *Notes and Queries*

JHI *Journal of the History of Ideas*

MLA *Modern Language Association*

RES *The Review of English Studies*

SiR	*Studies in Romanticism*
WC	*The Wordsworth Circle*

Other

Ashton	Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)
LL	*The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. Edwin W. Marrs jr., 3 vols (London: Ithaca, 1975-8)

Introduction

i. Coleridge's Dissenting Ministry 1794-8

Throughout the period 1794-8 Coleridge saw himself as a dissenting minister, and preached his evolving understanding of religion as the means to bring about individual and political liberty. He was preoccupied with the administration of religious and political authority, and poured his energy into analysing and challenging the bases on which the Church and State (the 'Ministries') projected religious and civil power. Though harshly critical of the 'Ministries', he did not affiliate himself with any political group in opposition to them. He became a Unitarian and moved in Unitarian circles throughout the period, but his Anglican upbringing, enormous appetite for diverse reading, and his developing poetic brilliance contributed to making Coleridge an unusual figure in Unitarianism.

Coleridge's individualistic approach to religion and politics manifested in a considerable range of projects, in different media, and to diverse audiences: he wrote, lectured, preached, and talked in the 'cause of religion' obsessively.[1] This thesis represents a sustained analysis of Coleridge's sense of being a dissenting minister, explores his evolving conception of 'religion', and its relation to political radicalism and Unitarian dissent.

A 'minister' is a person or thing 'acting under the authority of another; one who carries out executive duties as the agent or representative of a superior' (OED). And whether they are appointed by the government to administer state power, or by a church to administer religious duties, a ministry essentially involves a public function,

[1] *CL* i 371.

linking a higher authority with those ministered to. Accordingly this thesis centres predominantly on Coleridge the public figure, and the work and activities that had public exposure. This focus creates an illuminating perspective on a number of key areas in Coleridge criticism: his politic radicalism and ensuing retirement; his Unitarian dissent and subsequent rejection of the sect as not being Christianity at all; and the profound importance of the reception of his work to Coleridge and his ongoing development. There is also some substantial analysis of the 'private' Coleridge of the letters, notebooks, and anonymously- or un-published poetry. The emphasis will remain, however, on the public figure, exploring when and why there is a tension between the public and private modes in his work.

The period studied is framed by two dramatic changes of direction in Coleridge's career, and a brief consideration of them helps to introduce the character of Coleridge's dissenting ministry, as he saw it. The first is his rejection of the Anglican ministry whilst at Cambridge (1791-4), and the second is his rejection of the Unitarian pulpit (1798). In the case of the former, Coleridge did not formerly renounce his career but abandoned his studies at Cambridge altogether as he came under the influence of a number of prominent Unitarians (discussed in more detail in the second part of this introduction).

Prior to Cambridge Coleridge's upbringing is notable for its Anglicanism. His father, John Coleridge, and three brothers all went into the Church,[2] and the Coleridge family grew up in Ottery St. Mary, where John was minister of the church and master of the adjoining school. Coleridge remembered his father with respect and affection, describing him in March 1797 to his friend and neighbour in Nether Stowey, Thomas Poole, as follows: 'my Father was not a first-rate Genius – he was however a first-rate

[2] Father John Coleridge (1719-1781), and elder brothers William (1758-1780), Edward (1760-1843), and George (1764-1828), were all Anglican ministers.

Christian'.[3] He also told Poole that 'my father had [...] resolved, that I should be a Parson'.[4] The death of his father and subsequent re-location to Christ's Hospital in London at the age of eight, shattered the family bonds that were never really restored throughout Coleridge's life.

There is an interesting connection between Christ's Hospital, a charity school, and Unitarianism. One of the governors of the school, Thomas Firmin (1632-1697) funded a series of anti-trinitarian tracts in the 1680s and '90s, and according to one historian, 'the term Unitarian had obtained currency through the pious zeal of Thomas Firmin'.[5] However in Coleridge's day the school prepared many of its pupils for the Anglican Ministry, and the fact that Coleridge went on to Jesus College, Cambridge rather than a dissenting academy, suggests that he had not rejected the Ministry whilst at Christ's Hospital. A sermon written when Coleridge was in his final year at Christ's Hospital shows no signs of his impending dissent.[6]

All this was to change during the tumultuous period that he spent at Cambridge, or at least that he ought to have spent at Cambridge, for Coleridge regularly took off, engaging in a range of non-academic activities. He later told Poole that it was during his time at Cambridge that 'I formed those religious and political opinions which exclude me, I thank God, from the Law and the Church'.[7] One month before leaving Cambridge for good, he wrote a letter to his brother George dated 6 November 1794, attempting to convince his brother that he was continually acting in 'defence' of Jesus, even though he was about to abandon Cambridge altogether (and any thoughts of becoming an Anglican preacher):

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[3] *CL* i 310.
[4] *CL* i 354.
[5] Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (London: Green, 1895), p.23. Joseph Priestley wrote that he had reclaimed the term 'Unitarian' from Firmin: cf. *Early Opinions of Christ*, p.8.
[6] Cf. *SWF*, 12-17.
[7] *CL* i. 376.

> My Brother! I have at all times in all places exerted my powers in the defence of the Holy One of Nazareth against the Learning of the Historian, the *Libertinism* of the Wit, and (his worst Enemy!) the Mystery of the Bigot! (*CL* i. 126)

This particular letter had the more immediate inspiration of alcohol, though Coleridge thought better of admitting to this, inking out 'I am drunk'.[8] This might explain the fluctuating tone of the letter, which swings between the declarative and the confessional. The above extract is an example of the former, with its assertion of a perpetual ministry for 'the Holy One of Nazareth' – an unusually formal expression, as if 'Jesus' or 'Christ' were names too hallowed to mention. The confessional mode is found earlier in the letter as he discusses his 'INDOLENCE!' He admits to a habit of sitting 'in drowsy uneasiness – and doing nothing have thought, what a deal I had to do!' The above extract, then, forms a counterpoint to his inconstancy, by declaring his continual commitment to the cause of religion. Within a month of writing this letter, Coleridge would move in with Southey in Bristol, begin preparing lectures on politics and dissenting theology, and make preparations for their emigration to America. Coleridge's dissenting ministry had begun.

Over the next five years Coleridge would be a poet, journalist, lecturer, and preacher, in the name of religion. In the latter role he preached from many dissenting, usually Unitarian, pulpits, but despite this he was always profoundly reluctant to undertake anything but occasional preaching. On two occasions he came close to accepting permanent positions, and the second of these (a post at the Shrewsbury Unitarian chapel from January 1798) has gone down in Coleridgean legend because of William Hazlitt's record of events in 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823). Hazlitt's description of the meeting of his father, the Unitarian minister at nearby Wem, with

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[8] Cf. *CL* i. 126n.

Coleridge is both humorous and revealing:

> No two individuals were ever more unlike than were the host and his guest. A poet was to my father a sort of non-descript: yet whatever added grace to the Unitarian cause was to him welcome. He could hardly have been more surprised or pleased, if our visitor had worn wings. Indeed, his thoughts had wings; and as the silken sounds rustled round our little wainscoted parlour, my father threw back his spectacles over his forehead, his white hairs mixing with its sanguine hew; and a smile of delight beamed across his rugged cordial face, to think that Truth had found a new ally in Fancy![9]

Although Coleridge was applying to the Shrewsbury chapel and not Hazlitt's father's, there is an obvious problem of compatibility between them which reflects a more general variance between Coleridge and many Unitarians he would encounter. During the period in which Coleridge was writing some of his greatest and most mysterious poetry, including the 'Ancient Mariner', and, 'Kubla Khan', he was also contemplating a permanent role in a sect that prized rational and unambiguous defences of their theology.

The Unitarian brothers Josiah and Tom Wedgwood offered Coleridge an annuity for £150, the same as he would have received from the Shrewsbury Church, and with great relief he turned down the employment. Having delivered a series of probationary sermons beforehand in order to gain the approval of the congregation, and having been graciously accepted by them, Coleridge was obliged to write a series of letters explaining his apparently sudden change of heart. A particularly fascinating one is written to John Prior Estlin (1747-1817), the leader of the largest Unitarian chapel in Bristol, who had exerted his influence to get Coleridge the post at Shrewsbury. Coleridge's defence of rejecting the pulpit offers an insight into his conception of ministry and, perhaps surprisingly, of the diminutive role poetry would play in this:

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[9] Quoted in *S. T. Coleridge: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. Seamus Perry (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000), p.58. Hereafter *Interviews and Recollections*.

> I should be very unwilling to think that my efforts as a Christian Minister depended on my preaching regularly in one pulpit – God forbid! To the cause of Religion I solemnly devote all my best faculties – and if I wish to acquire knowledge as a philosopher and fame as a poet, I pray for grace that I may continue to feel what I now feel, that my greatest reason for wishing the one & the other, is that I may be enabled by my knowledge to defend Religion ably, and by my reputation to draw attention to the defence of it. (*CL* i. 371)

It is striking that he should write of poetry simply as a means to win fame and draw attention to the products of 'all my best faculties'. The Wordsworths had become his neighbours in Somerset in July 1797 (that is, six months prior to the Shrewsbury business), and it is unthinkable that Coleridge would speak of poetry in this way to them. It should also be noticed that although Coleridge is foregrounding philosophy as his means for defending religion, the basis of this judgment is his feelings – 'I pray for grace that I may continue to feel what I now feel'. It seems clear that Coleridge is foregrounding those aspects of his activities and religious concerns that would most appeal to the Unitarian Estlin.

This extract is, however, a largely accurate prediction of his ensuing career. Coleridge did become an enormously influential religious thinker and defender of the Anglican faith, and it was principally through his philosophical and theological writing rather than poetry, that he did this. The religion he preached hereafter, however, would not be what Estlin expected or hoped for, and by 1814 Coleridge's friendship with Estlin would be soured by his attacks on Unitarianism.[10] Coleridge's rejection of the Shrewsbury pulpit was by no means a rejection of Unitarianism itself, and indeed he continued to lay preach in Unitarian chapels in Somerset. Never again, however, would Unitarianism appear in his work except in a negative context.

The Wedgwood annuity enabled him to stay in Nether Stowey for a little longer with

[10] Cf. *LS*, 110n.

the Wordsworths before travelling to Germany in September 1798. As he left Coleridge would make arrangements for two final publications, apparently with varying degrees of concern. The most famous of these would be a volume that would have enormous significance to the development of poetry, *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge seemed almost indifferent to the detail of getting it through the press, and it would be published anonymously. Consequently I have largely ignored *Lyrical Ballads* in this thesis; Coleridge was not seeking initially to actively engage with his political, poetical, or religious reputation with this volume, and so it has little to do with his dissenting ministry. The other publication prepared as he left for Germany, however, does, and Coleridge paid careful attention to having it published (by Joseph Johnson): the pamphlet *Fears in Solitude*. The three poems comprising the pamphlet – 'France: An Ode', 'Fears in Solitude', and 'Frost at Midnight' – were written in the three months immediately following Coleridge's rejection of the Shrewsbury pulpit, but with the exception of 'France', not published until late 1798. In this short volume the public was confronted with a new emphasis in Coleridge's ministry, focusing on 'Nature' as a minister of liberty, rather than political revolution. Moreover Coleridge creates a dialogue with his earlier political and religious work, in the context of the complicated political situation in 1798. *Fears in Solitude* offers us a vantage point from which to understand the shape of Coleridge's dissenting ministry as it developed over the previous five years, and a discussion of the pamphlet forms the conclusion to the thesis.

The main body of the thesis, then, is concerned with the years in between leaving Cambridge and leaving England altogether five years later. The first chapter centres on Coleridge's system of Pantisocracy, for it is here that we can find his first attempts to preach a new social order. Prior to the Pantisocracy Coleridge had not made any

sustained efforts to challenge the Ministries, let alone supersede them with his own ideas on the perfect political and religious ordering of a society.

Coleridge's exertions to promote the scheme to a wide range of social groups are explored, a process both he and Southey described as 'preaching' (though Southey's description is not without irony). The attempted Christianization of the scheme by Coleridge is also examined, as he attempted to distinguish it from the Godwinian basis that Southey had contributed. As becomes clear, however, it is the Pantisocracy rather than the 'Holy One of Nazareth' that Coleridge preached 'at all times in all places'. The chapter concludes by arguing that the Pantisocracy has been critically misrepresented as a radical proposal for reform in England. As I argue, Coleridge never intended to apply the attitudes towards Property on which the scheme is based, to English society. Pantisocracy remained a utopian scheme whose principal value to Coleridge was in the straining of his faculties to analyse society and its religious and political administration.

The second chapter focuses on Coleridge's growing interest in Unitarianism, by examining the religious theory and practise of the most important Unitarian figure in the eighteenth century, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Priestley was of central importance to Coleridge in the 1790s both as the author of a huge body of defences of Unitarianism that Coleridge adopted; and he was a key influence on the social circles in which Coleridge moved, and began to preach. The chapter explores the foundations of Priestley's theology in his distinctive method of reading of the Bible. Priestley was forthright in his avowal of the rationality of Christianity and his discussions of the nature of the Deity make belief a matter of common sense. This informed his writing with a calm and contented matter-of-factness, and which became an uncomfortable component of Coleridge's writing. The final part of the chapter

explores how Priestley's religious ideas relate to his vision for social and political reform, and how this vision reveals a disturbingly coercive aspect to his ostensibly liberal dissent.

The third chapter analyses the 'Six Lectures on Revealed Religion' that Coleridge delivered in the first months of 1795, to Bristol audiences. The Six Lectures have been chosen rather than the published lectures (*Conciones ad Populum*, *The Plot Discovered*, and the *Lecture on the Slave-Trade*)[11], because they offer an incomparable level of detail regarding the centrality of religion to Coleridge's personal and political ideas. Moreover they offer a fascinating insight into the way in which Coleridge fused the principles underpinning the Pantisocracy with the theology of Priestley. The chapter argues that fundamental personal differences in their understanding of Christianity, manifests in tensions in the Lectures both in terms of the representation of religion, and its application to society.

The fourth chapter examines the work Coleridge produced immediately after the collapse of the Pantisocracy. Although both *The Watchman* and 'Religious Musings' are written in a bold and declarative style, I argue that they cover a profound sense of uncertainty reflected in their subtitles: 'a miscellany' and 'a desultory poem' respectively. Both works exhibit Coleridge's difficulty in finding sympathetic audiences, and in consequence his tonal control suffers. There is a marked difference between the dramatic promises of universal liberty, and the gradual and constitutional means by which this would be achieved. These issues reflect a more general problem of how to relate religion to politics: Coleridge's attempts to map his 'system of Christ' on to the 'present state of society', neither persuaded his audiences en masse, or indeed himself.

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[11] This lecture was published in *The Watchman*, pp.131ff.

The fifth chapter considers Coleridge's ambivalent attitudes towards both the sermon form, and dissenting pulpits. I explore the paradox of Coleridge's esteemed reputation and facility as a preacher and his extreme reluctance to practise more than lay preaching. This is partly due, I suggest, to the nature of Unitarian worship which reflected its mixed origins in dissent *and* Anglicanism. By reading the sermon by Theophilus Lindsey preached at the inauguration of the first Unitarian chapel in 1774, an unexpectedly conservative picture of the dissenting sect emerges. This chapter argues that despite the predominant critical representation of Unitarianism as being synonymous with political radicalism, the conservative strain continued in the sect even after the French Revolution. This is particularly true of Unitarian worship (rather than the more politically nuanced publications by many Unitarians), and so close attention is paid to the contexts in which Coleridge preached. The chapter ends by exploring Coleridge's attempts to reformulate his ministry on broader grounds, to continue to fight the cause of *religion*, and not simply the Unitarian cause.

The final chapter concludes the thesis by examining the quarto volume *Fears in Solitude*. I suggest that the three poems comprising this volume are a conscious attempt to re-cast his ministry by disavowing his former political radicalism, and abandoning the active defence of Unitarian. The volume contains a number of significant passages that are in dialogue with his earlier work, and by exploring these intertextualities, a perspective is gained on the development, and then withdrawal from his dissenting ministry.

There is also an appendix which is an account of the history of Unitarian in England since the seventeenth century Test Acts led to discrimination. This history demonstrates the mixed background of Unitarianism in Anglicanism and dissent, which partly accounts for both its radical and conservative tendencies.

Before turning to chapter one and the Pantisocracy, however, it is helpful to contextualise this study by introducing a number of contemporary and subsequent debates relating to the character of Unitarianism and of political radicalism in the 1790s.

ii. Unitarianism and Radicalism

In some respects it is easier to say what Unitarianism was not in the 1790s, than to say what it was. It was not a uniform denomination with a commonly agreed agenda in the spheres of worship, theology, or politics. The inauguration of the first Unitarian chapel in 1774 is described in chapter five, but important as this event was, it did not signify widespread agreement on the form of Unitarian worship. Indeed the order of service was essentially the Book of Common Prayer used by Anglicans, and throughout the period in which Coleridge was a Unitarian, there was not a distinct and universal Unitarian liturgy.[12] Indeed the controversial Unitarian classical scholar and ex-Fellow of Jesus College, Gilbert Wakefield (1756-1801), argued against the 'propriety of public or social worship' altogether.[13]

With regard to its theology during this period, it was still attempting to distinguish itself from Presbyterianism and Arianism, and in the process upsetting a number of Arians. Stuart Andrews has described the attempts of some prominent Unitarians in 1791, to establish a national network with a shared theology. The 'Unitarian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Practice of Virtue' published its

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[12] Lindsey used a version of the Book of Common Prayer revised by the Anglican but Arian-leaning Samuel Clarke (1675-1729).

[13] Cf. Gilbert Wakefield, *An Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public of Social Worship* (London: Deighton, 1792).

principles such that Arians would be excluded:

> The fundamental principles of this society are, That there is but ONE God, the SOLE Former, Supporter, and Governor of the universe, the ONLY proper object of religious worship; and that there is one mediator between God and men, the MAN Christ Jesus, who was commissioned by God to instruct men in their duty, and to reveal the doctrine of a future life.[14]

Arians believed in the divinity of Christ but only as a consequence of the will of the Father. They believed, therefore, in an unequal Trinity with a hierarchical structure descending from the Father through the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. The most famous Arian in this period was Dr. Richard Price (1723-91), and despite being effectively excluded on theological grounds, he contributed financially to the society. However a number of prominent Unitarians objected to the specificity of these theological principles, notably those at Cambridge.

A final point of division amongst Unitarians was politics. Although they felt aggrieved in common that they were discriminated against by the Test Acts, and this led to critical censure of both Ministries, it did not lead to universal antiestablishmentism.

There was some common ground among Unitarians as well, however. The most influential Unitarian theologian Joseph Priestley in whose voluminous writings he attempts to 'rationalise Christianity'. The principle themes that dominate his writings – the truth of revealed religion, and its corruption by the Church – were promoted by all Unitarians (although with dramatically different emphasis and intensity). Unitarians were generally intellectual and learned, and the numerous dissenting academies had a considerable proportion of Unitarian tutors. They were socially respectable figures, active in the promotion of civil rights and education, and were

[14] Quoted in Stuart Andrews, *Unitarian Radicalism: Political Rhetoric, 1770-1814* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2003), p.111. Hereafter *Unitarian Radicalism*.

often associated with the mercantile class beginning to thrive in the industrial cities of the Midlands and north of England. Finally they were indiscriminately tarred with a Jacobin brush – along with all other radicals, whether atheist, deist, dissenting, or Anglican – in the fierce reactionary backlash in England, in the wake of the French Revolution.

The Revolution had an enormous impact on the Unitarians with whom Coleridge became acquainted whilst studying at Cambridge. The Unitarian presence at Cambridge, especially Jesus College, and the effect of the French Revolution, has been discussed at length by Nicholas Roe.[15] It is helpful, however, to consider the experiences of two Unitarians with whom Coleridge is closely associated, George Dyer (1755-1841) and William Frend (1757-1841).

Dyer, a poet, political pamphleteer, and scholar, was something of a role model for Coleridge in his dissenting and political activities.[16] He became involved in the attempts by Unitarians to obtain relief from subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, publishing *An Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles* in 1789. Interestingly he published a second edition in 1792, and so these editions straddle significant changes in the socio-political atmosphere in England.

Subscription to the Articles was a key issue throughout the century to Unitarians, and dissenters more generally, but momentum for the cause picked up in the latter part of the century. It is interesting to note, however, that despite the obviously religious nature of subscription, many argued that it should not be viewed as a religious inquiry at all but one of civil liberty. The issue of whether the Church was theologically correct in its Articles was seen as secondary to the universal obligation to subscribe to

[15] Cf. Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Hereafter *Radical Years*.
[16] Cf. Ibid., chapter 3.

them, because refusal to do so would end in the restriction of civil liberties.[17] In the preface to the second edition, Dyer relates that this had been the response of some of his friends to the first edition of his *Inquiry*:

> Some friends have expressed a concern, that in a question, which, they think, ought to have been confined to liberty, I have introduced religious controversy; conceiving, if I had directed my attention to a single view of the question, or at least, if I had not wandered into the province of theology, my Inquiry might probably have been better received. I give these gentlemen credit for their generous intentions; but beg leave to observe, that those writers who have attended to the political side of the question only, can have presented but a partial view of the subject. They cannot have exhibited the whole grievance of subscription. And how could I have examined the question with respect to Christianity, without inquiring into the Christian doctrines? [...] Besides (why should I conceal it?) I had a nobler end in view than merely to oppose human authority in matters of religion.[18]

It seems extraordinary, in some respects, that Dyer should feel the need to explain the presence of religious material in such an inquiry. And although he attends 'to the political side of the question' in the first edition, he describes the context of composition as one in which there was no intended connection between his *Inquiry* and the events that were transpiring in France:

> It may appear a degree of self-denial in me never once to have alluded in the former edition to what was then transacting in France. The truth is, when I was engaged in publishing my Inquiry, the affairs of that country were, as yet, suspended on the edge of contingencies. Without looking abroad, I had sufficient materials to fix my attention at home. I seldom conversed with persons engaged in French politics. I lived in the retirement of a village, 'conversing mostly with books and trees.'[19]

When, however, Dyer prepared a second edition for the Unitarian publisher Joseph Johnson in 1792, he could not avoid acknowledging the dramatic changes in the political atmosphere:

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[17] The legal penalties of dissent are outlined in the appendix. The disagreement as to whether subscription was a civil *or* religious matter, is discussed in more detail in *Unitarian Radicalism*, esp. chs. 2 & 10.

[18] George Dyer, *An Inquiry into the Nature of Subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles*, 2nd edn (London: J. Johnson, 1792), pp.x-xi.

[19] Ibid. p.vi.

> As the affairs of France began to draw to a crisis, it was impossible to help giving a glance to them. They gave rise to debates in England immediately connected with the subject of this inquiry, on natural rights, civil liberty, the genius of the British government, the character of our clergy and ecclesiastical establishment.[20]

Accordingly Dyer made considerable alterations and additions to the second edition, including an extended inquiry into how far subscription 'is consistent with the principles of the British constitution'.[21] In effect Dyer's *Inquiry* became politicised, but on account of the fact that war had not yet broken out with France, and that Dyer strikes a moderate tone throughout, he would not receive the censure and notoriety of his companion at Cambridge, William Frend. Frend's case illustrates more dramatically the crucial changes in attitudes towards Unitarians, as a consequence of the French Revolution.

As with many Unitarians, Frend originally preached in the Church and held positions in two local parishes close to Cambridge. He had begun questioning trinitarianism as he learned Hebrew, and fairly rapidly became critical of a great deal of the Church's doctrines. Principally he was a mathematician, and Fellow of Jesus College which was renowned for its Unitarian contingent:

> Frend had been Fellow and Tutor of Jesus since 1781, adopting Unitarian views only in 1787, when he resigned his Cambridgeshire livings. Frend published *An Address to the Inhabitants of Cambridge*, defending his antitrinitarian views. As a result he was removed from his tutorship but continued to reside in college, where Coleridge came under his influence. Jesus College, in the late 1780s and early 1790s, had a recognized Unitarian reputation. William Burdon, Fellow of Emmanuel from 1788, could write to an Oxford correspondent: 'Socinianism . . . has gained some ground here, three of the fellows of Jesus College are avowedly of the persuasion and some others are thought to have a tendency towards it.'[22]

Frend joined the debate on the Articles, publishing his *Thoughts on Subscription to*

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[20] Ibid. p.vii.
[21] Ibid. title page.
[22] *Unitarian Radicalism*, pp.27-8.

Religious Tests in 1788,[23] and though his provocative style and subject matter restricted his role at Jesus, the response to his most famous work ended his time at Cambridge altogether. *Peace and Union: Recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans*, a pamphlet of about fifty pages, was published in February 1793. The timing could not have been worse: France had just declared war on England, and only a month before the French monarch had been guillotined.

At first glance *Peace and Union* appears to be conciliatory and moderate. It is advocating 'peace' and 'union', is addressed to both 'Republicans and Anti-Republicans', is critical of the French Revolution, and praises the English constitution:

> The assassinations, murders, massacres, burning of houses, plundering of property, open violations of justice, which have marked the progress of the French revolution, must stagger the boldest republican in his wishes to overthrow any constitution [...] The [English] government has for these hundred years past been acknowledged as the best in Europe, and unless a much better is pointed out to us, it will be unwise in the extreme to destroy such a system, under which we have experienced so much public and private happiness. [...] The present situation of France forbids us, to consider as yet its constitution as worthy of imitation.[24]

Frend argues that both the French and the American constitutions are without the 'sanction of experience' and besides, it would be an infringement of a people's rights to enforce a new system. Instead, Frend wishes to draw his reader into agreement that the English government has some room for improvement:

> As therefore the overthrow of our constitution, with or without the introduction of the most perfect system, could not be compassed without injuring a vast number of our fellow creatures, it should seem, that the contending parties [Republicans and Anti-Republicans] might accede nearer to each other, if it could be proved, that our government is susceptible of improvement, and that various changes might be introduced for the benefit of the community at large.[25]

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[23] William Frend, *Thoughts on Subscription to Religious Tests, in a Letter to Rev. H.W. Coulthurst* (St. Ives: 1788).
[24] *Peace and Union*, pp.1-3.
[25] *Ibid.* pp.4-5.

Frend adopts a conciliatory tone as he suggests reforms to, among other things, the duration of parliament, representation of the people, the game laws, and the poor laws. He has a tendency to gently mock counter viewpoints, or present the sufferings of those he perceives to be victims with an irony directed at the causes, but throughout much of the pamphlet he is not antagonistic in the presentation of his arguments. Frend's writing on the Church, however, was likely to, and did, cause controversy. He rejected the idea altogether that it was a religious institution:

> The established church of England can be considered only as a political institution. The design of it is to celebrate at certain times religious worship, and to instruct the people in certain doctrines laid down by act of parliament. Whether the instruction communicated is suited to present times, and whether the expense attending is proportioned to the benefits, which the subject derives from it, are questions of political esquire.[26]

He goes on to criticise the episcopacy as merely 'patrons of every species of luxury', but although these statements are provocative, he had made similar criticisms in his earlier *Thoughts on Subscription*. The socio-political context had dramatically changed between 1788 and 1793, however, and Frend was tried by the University authorities, found guilty, and banished from Jesus College altogether. Roe has commented on Frend's retrospective recognition that the public context had changed when he came to publish *Peace and Union*:

> Thinking back on his trial, Frend wondered why he had not been prosecuted when his *Thoughts on Subscription* had first appeared in 1788: 'Why was it not then done? the answer is obvious. The public mind had not then been poisoned by proclamations: the terms Jacobin, republican, and leveller had not been familiarized to an English ear'.[27]

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[26] *Ibid.* pp.25-6.
[27] *Radical Years,* pp.91-2.

Whilst Frend appears to have been taken by surprise by the more severe response to *Peace and Union*, it is difficult to take his assessment without reservation. Not only had he criticised the Church, he had also criticised Pitt's war policy, and perhaps most controversial of all is his attitude towards the execution of the French monarch:

> Let us strip the subject of figures of rhetoric, and no Englishman need be alarmed at the execution of an individual at Paris. Louis Capet was once king of France, and entitled to the honours due to that exalted station. The supreme power in the nation declared, that France should be a republic. From that moment Louis Capet lost his titles. He was accused of enormous crimes, confined as a state prisoner, tried by the national convention, found guilty, condemned, and executed. What is there wonderful in this? [...] It is in short no business of ours, and if all the crowned heads on the continent are taken off, it is no business of ours.[28]

Given the association perceived to exist between Dissenters and the king-killing Puritans of the previous century, Frend's casual acceptance and justification of the French monarch's execution was sure to provoke censure. In his account of the whole affair, Frend refers to the Vice-Chancellor's closing speech in the trial,:

> Were not the times, when the pamphlet appeared, most critical? Did the author inculcate the necessity of peace and good order? [...] Did he inculcate a respect for the king and parliament of this country, and for the reformed religion, and the functions of the clergy as established by law? In a word, was it not his plain object to teach the degraded laity, that they were sitting like brute beasts under an usurped authority?[29]

Frend's apparent disregard for the changes in the socio-political climate is not uncharacteristic of a modular form of thinking common among Unitarians. He approaches the State, Church, Monarchy, and Christianity as discrete bodies that might be criticised individually, and without impinging upon the others. But this is a naïve conception of their interrelations, particularly in the increasingly hostile reactionary climate of England in the mid-1790s. This modular thinking is discussed

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[28] *Peace and Union*, pp.45-6.
[29] From Frend's *An Account of the Proceedings in the University of Cambridge*, cited in *Radical Years*, p.107.

in more detail in chapter two with regard to Priestley's protestations that his writing is rarely political. The key point at this stage, however, is to observe that a Unitarian could seem significantly less radical to himself or other Unitarians, than to the 'public mind'. The more moderate Theophilus Lindsey seemed to be aware of this discrepancy, writing to a close correspondent in September 1793: '[I am] grieved that the war is likely to continue, as it will prevent the nation from cooling and returning to a better temper in laying the unavoidable evils and burdens that must result from it at the door of Dissenters of all sorts.'[30]

It will be clear, then, that Coleridge attended Jesus College at a particularly turbulent period, and indeed only three months after he had taken up residence, he wrote to his concerned brother George, to defend his apparent companionship with Frend.[31] And things would become more and more difficult for Unitarians with radical sympathies over the ensuing years. Not only was Frend obliged to leave Cambridge, but Priestley no longer felt safe in England and so emigrated to America. By 1798, Gilbert Wakefield's *Address to the People of Great Britain* would land him in gaol for two years, and his publisher Joseph Johnson would receive a six month sentence. Coleridge, famously, would find himself the subject of unwanted attention by a government spy whilst in Nether Stowey.[32]

It was something of a mixed blessing for Coleridge, therefore, to emerge onto a scene in which he was expected in a sense to take the place of the Unitarian radicals who had been silenced. Moreover his public appearances began in 1795 by which time two years of war with France had entrenched opinion among the ruling classes and in the public mind. Coleridge's experiences as a political and religious speaker

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[30] *Letters of Theophilus Lindsey*, H. McLachlan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), pp.89-90. Hereafter *Lindsey Letters*.
[31] See chapter one.
[32] Described by Coleridge in the *Biographia*, i. 193-4.

very much reflect these challenging circumstances. In his first three lectures delivered at Bristol in early 1795, Coleridge related his hostile reception to George Dyer:

> Mobs and Mayors, Blockheads and Brickbats, Placards and Press gangs have leagued in horrible Conspiracy against me – The Democrats are as sturdy in the support of me – but their number is comparatively small - / Two or three uncouth and unbrained Automata have threatened my Life – and in the last Lecture the Genus infimum were scarcely restrained from attacking the house in which the 'damn'd Jacobine was jawing away.'
>
> The first Lecture I was *obliged* to publish, it having been confidently asserted that there was Treason in it. (*CL* i. 152)

Shortly afterwards Coleridge would begin preaching, but almost immediately his reputation was such that he thought it unwise to preach in Bristol. He began in Bath, therefore, but his first sermons were little more than political commentary delivered in a devotional context. However, the response of the congregation according to Joseph Cottle, the bookseller and printer of Coleridge's first volumes of poetry, was boredom and indifference rather than hostility. This was an early indication to Coleridge that even within the context of Unitarian chapels, he could not expect either an appetite for politics, or agreement with his views.

Although Coleridge received more favourable responses to his preaching during his tour to promote *The Watchman* in the first months of 1796, it would not be long before the tide of international events would go against dissenters more emphatically. Paul Magnuson has drawn attention to the dramatic change in fortunes for rational dissenters in Nottingham. It was 'a Whig town [in which] Dissenters greatly outnumbered communicants of the Church of England' where Coleridge had been generously received on his Watchman Tour. However, 'sentiment in favour of the war became dominant in Nottingham in the mid 1790's. In the later part of the decade, fears of invasion and government repression of dissent in London turned more people

against radical dissent.'[33]

Government repression and the tide of public opinion were just two factors, though very important ones, that encouraged Coleridge to retire from regular political activism in the cities. He was also seeing and experiencing things differently as the decade progressed. An article in *The Watchman* published in April 1796, 'Remonstrance to the French Legislators', marks 'a crucial turn in his ideas about France', as editor Lewis Patton has observed.[34] It was becoming more difficult to see the liberating principles of the French Revolution as issuing a benevolent legacy. Moreover Coleridge's personal circumstances were becoming fraught. The strain of his exertions over the previous months – and he worked tirelessly in the first half of 1796 – and a host of family and financial pressures were beginning to have a serious affect on his physical and mental health. He records these issues in a letter to the Rev. John Edwards in March 1796:

> Since I last wrote you, I have been tottering on the edge of madness—my mind overbalanced on the e contra side of Happiness / the repeated blunders of the printer, the forgetfulness & blunders of my associate &c &c abroad, and at home Mrs Coleridge dangerously ill, and expected hourly to miscarry. Such has been my situation for this last fortnight—I have been obliged to take Laudanum almost every night.[35]

Not surprisingly there is a fairly dramatic falling away in his work of comment on particular political policy. Just two months after *The Watchman* was abandoned, he wrote to Estlin on July 4 1796 telling him that 'local and temporary Politics are my aversion – they narrow the understanding, they narrow the heart, they fret the temper'.[36] This was partly in response to an offer by James Perry, the editor of the

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[33] Paul Magnuson, 'Subscribers to Coleridge's *Poems* (1796), or Duckings and Drubbings in Nottingham', *CB*, 12 (1998), 6-13 (p.8).
[34] Cf. *TW*, 269-73.
[35] *CL* i. 188.
[36] *CL* i 222.

Morning Chronicle, to employ Coleridge to write for him and so live in London. Though Coleridge felt financially compelled to take up the offer, his dislike of London and political writing at this time was heightened by what he thought he would have to forego in order to take the post. He wrote to Poole about the offer, expressing concern that 'if I go, farewell Philosophy! Farewell, the Muse! Farewell, my literary Fame!'[37]

Coleridge turned down the offer, and spent the following six months hatching a number of plans that included becoming a private tutor for a family in Derby, and becoming a Unitarian minister. He would eventually settle in Nether Stowey on the last day of 1796, subsisting on the produce of his garden, supplementing the family income by tutoring Charles Lloyd, and receiving charitable support from Poole and others. Over the next eighteen months Coleridge would write much of the poetry on which his reputation as a great Romantic poet is based.

This period of poetic flowering and, relative to his earlier activities, political withdrawal, has occasioned an enormous amount of critical writing. The discussion of this period during Coleridge's lifetime was not as detailed as it has subsequently become. Hazlitt, for example, distinguished between the young Coleridge and the mature Coleridge as a radical then an apostate respectively. This contrast is graphically demonstrated by Hazlitt's review of Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual*. Coleridge published this work – 'a Lay Sermon addressed to the Higher Classes of Society'[38] – in December 1816, and Hazlitt responded in a letter of to the editor of *The Examiner*. Hazlitt recalls his awe and wonder at seeing the 'poet-preacher' deliver a sermon at Shrewsbury in January 1798, but is scornful of the change of view represented by his later work:

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[37] *CL* i 227.
[38] *LS* 3.

> The preacher then launched into his subject, like an eagle dallying with the wind. *That* sermon, like *this* Sermon [i.e. *The Statesman's Manual*], was upon peace and war; upon church and state – not their alliance, but their separation – on the spirit of the world and the spirit of Christianity, not as the same, but as opposed to one another.[39]

In a letter to Josiah Wedgwood written a month before the sermon, there is further evidence of Coleridge's radicalism as he describes the 'union of Religion with the Government' as being one of 'the most pressing evils'.[40] And perhaps more revealing is John Thelwall's response to a letter from Coleridge in which the latter sets out his two options – the pulpit or the annuity – and ambiguously writes 'I accepted the offer'.[41] Slightly confused, Thelwall wrote to a correspondent of his concern that Coleridge had accepted the pulpit:

> I hope he did not, for I know he cannot preach very often without travelling from the pulpit to the Tower. Mount him but upon his darling hobby-horse, 'the republic of God's own making', and away he goes like hey-go-mad, spattering and splashing through thick and thin and scattering more levelling sedition and constructive treason than poor Gilly or myself ever dreamt of.[42]

This humorous assessment of Coleridge's excitability may well reflect an emphasis on radicalism that Thelwall's company elicited. Coleridge may have been more circumspect in other company. Nevertheless, these contemporary views of Coleridge as a radical during his retirement in Nether Stowey contrast with how the period has subsequently been critically represented.

The traditional reading is that in the wake of the perceived failure of the French Revolution, Coleridge turned from external politics to the internal powers of the Imagination, a process that began when he retired to Nether Stowey. As M. H.

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[39] Quoted in *Interviews and Reflections*, p.56.
[40] *CL* i. 365.
[41] *CL* i. 383.
[42] Quoted in Judith Thompson, 'An Autumnal Blast, a Killing Frost: Coleridge's Poetic Conversation with John Thelwall', *SiR*, 36 (Fall 1997), 427-56 (p.433n). Hereafter *Autumnal Blast*.

Abrams memorably phrased it in *Natural Supernaturalism*, from 'Apocalypse by Revolution', to, 'Apocalypse by Imagination'.[43] Richard Cronin describes Abrams as representing 'the last of a long critical tradition that described the great Romantics as winning their poetic maturity by surrendering the political commitments that marked their youth in favour of a more dignified commitment to the life of the imagination'.[44]

The problem with this idea is that to be sustainable, a good deal of Coleridge's work in the latter part of the 1790s has to be disregarded or at least read in a limited context. Most obviously, for example, in the first half of 1798 Coleridge was engaged by Daniel Stuart, editor of the *Morning Post*, to supply 'verses or political Essays'. David V. Erdman has described the character of this work as follows:

> The political essay and short paragraphs of this first season represent in their intensity and irony, and in the 'English Jacobinism' of their themes, a recrudescence of the political fervour of Coleridge's Bristol lectures of 1795 and the early numbers of his *Watchman* of 1796. (*EOT* i. lxi)

Additionally the assumptions underlying the tradition epitomized by Abrams are partly a consequence of the kind of attention paid to Coleridge. Abrams attempts to notice changes and developments in Romantic poetry as a whole, or at least 'the big six', and is correspondingly general in his analysis. And in the case of Coleridge, they partake of a more general critical tendency described by Paul Magnuson:

> Our reconstructions of Coleridge in this century are based upon the publication of his notebooks and letters, by our knowledge of the scholarship that has traced his reading, and by our knowledge of his later career.[45]

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[43] M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971). See especially chapter six.
[44] Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p.1. Hereafter *Politics of Romantic Poetry*.
[45] Paul Magnuson, 'The Politics of "Frost at Midnight"', *WC*, 22 (1991), 3-11 (p.3).

This is not to suggest that such contexts produce inferior or unreliable readings of the poetry, but when assessing issues such as the withdrawal from political engagement, it is essential to pay particular attention to the public discourses into which Coleridge entered.

One of the first critics to pay careful attention to the public contexts is Kelvin D. Everest who begins his book, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry*, by observing that 'the historical context of Coleridge's poetry has been neglected'.[46] On the basis of his reading of both the political and the literary contexts, Everest insists that retirement does not signify an abandonment of politics in the conversation poems. His argument is essentially in two parts. The first part relates to the Pantisocracy that Coleridge and Southey hoped to establish in America. Everest's reading of the Pantisocracy is discussed in detail in chapter one, but it is helpful to consider it in outline here. He suggests that although the scheme was partly escapist, it also had significant political implications because it embodied the ideal of a good society:

> The escape that Coleridge envisaged did not constitute an abdication of social responsibility; Pantisocracy was to enshrine the spirit of a good society, was to be a purification of the springs of benevolence. Exposure to the divine influence of nature would be one means to this purification, but another, equally important means would be constituted in the healing paradise of familial community.[47]

He goes on to suggest that Coleridge's view of the ownership of property 'was in terms of practical politics more radical than anything implied by Godwin'.[48]

The second part of Everest's argument involves mapping the aims and ideals of the Pantisocracy onto Coleridge's life in Nether Stowey: 'it is important to realise that for Coleridge the cottage at Nether Stowey was, quite consciously, a version of the

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[46] Kelvin Everest, *Coleridge's Secret Ministry: The Context of the Conversation Poems 1795-1798* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1979), p.1. Hereafter *Secret Ministry*.
[47] Ibid, p.79.
[48] Ibid, p.84.

pantisocratic ideal'.[49] Through this identity Everest argues that Coleridge was radical throughout most of the decade, even when writing in the more private mode of the conversation poems.

Everest's discussion of radicalism is subtle, and is responsive to Coleridge's own attempts in maturity to disavow his alleged Jacobinism. These attempts rest on Coleridge's assertion that the *principles* underlying his early political enthusiasm were not those of the Jacobins, and a particularly controversial statement of this comes in the *Biographia*. Coleridge relates his experiences on the Watchman Tour in 1796, during which he befriends a number of people in the industrial towns of the Midlands and the North, 'who interested themselves for me'. He claims that 'they will bear witness for me, how opposite even then my principles were to those of Jacobinism or even of democracy'.[50] I discuss Thelwall's response to this below, but to return to Everest, he considers such statements to misrepresent the charged atmosphere of the 1790s, and how clearly Coleridge's political character would have seemed to his contemporaries. His point is made forcefully by reference to the contexts in which Coleridge had published in the 1790s:

> Notwithstanding his 'principles', Coleridge's political colours would have been perfectly apparent to any intelligent contemporary. By July 1798 Coleridge had published poetry in the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Morning Post*, and the *Monthly Magazine*. All these papers were anti-ministerial and Francophile in editorial policy. Coleridge's 'Sonnets on Eminent Characters', a roll-call of liberal heroes, had appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* in December 1794 and January 1795; a glance at the index of the *Anti-Jacobin* tells us all we need to know about its attitude to the *Chronicle*:
>
> > *Morning Chronicle* – its impiety – its blasphemy – its falsehood – its historical, geographical and political ignorance – its insolence – baseness – and stupidity. *Passim, passim.*[51]

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[49] Ibid, pp.90-1.
[50] *BL* i. 184.
[51] *Secret Ministry*, p.140.

The issue is further clarified by Nicholas Roe who describes the contraction of the signification of the word 'Jacobin' in the period immediately prior to Coleridge's first public addresses on political issues:

> The political identity of Jacobinism changed with the trajectory of the French Revolution. In 1789 a Jacobin was a member of the political club which met in the old convent of the Dominicans in Paris, although Jacobinism might be identified more generally with the Declaration of Rights of Man, August 1789, and with peaceful constitutional reform. But in later years Jacobinism was associated with the Terror which began in October 1793 and culminated at the execution of Robespierre on 28 July 1794.[52]

In view of this it is sensible to suggest, as Everest does, that,

> His work had been Jacobin, 'in the common acceptation of the name' as a contemptuous blanket term for all radicals, in its attitudes to the government, the war, and individual property.[53]

John Thelwall, political lecturer and prominent figure in the London reform societies, enjoyed a fairly brief but close friendship with Coleridge in 1796-7. Both men felt the pressure in that period to retire from public political address, and but for local opposition, Thelwall would have formed a 'literary and political triumvirate' with Coleridge and Wordsworth in Somerset.[54] When Thelwall read the above passage in the *Biographia*, however, he annotated his copy, writing alongside Coleridge's disavowal of Jacobinism (quoted above), 'he was a down right zealous leveller & indeed in one of the worst senses of the word he was a Jacobin, a man of blood'.[55] It is difficult to discredit such a view given Thelwall's awareness of the political situation in the 1790s and his personal familiarity with Coleridge. Roe, however,

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[52] Nicholas Roe, 'Coleridge and John Thelwall: The Road to Nether Stowey', *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, eds. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp.60-80 (p.62). Hereafter *Road to Stowey*.
[53] *Secret Ministry*, p.104.
[54] A phrase Thelwall used in a letter to his wife. Quoted in *Road to Stowey*, p.74.
[55] Quoted in *Road to Stowey*, p.62.

raises two relevant issues. First of all he suggests that the harshness of Thelwall's criticism may well have been prompted by his feeling slighted by Coleridge when in 1797, he advised him not to move to Nether Stowey. This symbolised a cooling off in their relationship that was probably exacerbated by the intensity of the friendship that had developed with the Wordsworths. More importantly, however, Roe points out that 'it is difficult to identify any "sanguinary tendency" in any of Coleridge's surviving letters to Thelwall'.[56] It should be added that it is difficult to identify any sanguinary tendency in Coleridge's writing throughout the period altogether.[57]

Despite the apparent absence of a blood-thirsty Jacobinism in his writing, much of his political writing is clearly antiministerial, and so in the crude terms in which Jacobin was used, Coleridge would have been considered so by any but the most liberal minded. In the *Conciones ad Populum*, for example, he writes the following of the Prime Minister, William Pitt:

> This man, William Pitt, did not then know that he should be a Minister compared with whom Lord North might be canonized: and that with unheard of artifices and oppressions that may not be named, he should carry on a causeless War against a Patriot people, more fertile in horrors even than the American. (*LPR*, 64-5).

And shortly after this Coleridge would condemn the Church for their support of the war:

> Instead of the Ministers of the Gospel, a Roman might recognize in these Dignitaries the High-priests of Mars – with this difference, that the Ancients fatted their Victims for the Altar, we prepare ours for sacrifice by leanness. (*LPR*, 67-8)

Clearly Coleridge is antiministerial and indeed indulges his rhetorical skills in

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[56] *Road to Stowey*, p.63.

[57] A possible exception to this is 'Religious Musings', but as I argue in chapter four, I consider the violent imagery to be more a function of Coleridge's rhetoric than of a serious political commitment to revolution by violent means.

creating a powerful condemnation of the moral integrity of both Church and State.[58] It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that Coleridge *never* advocates political revolution by a popular violent uprising. On the contrary he champions the leadership of a 'small but glorious band, whom we may truly distinguish by the name of thinking and disinterested Patriots'.[59] As the editors of Bollingen *Lectures 1795* suggest, this model for social reform prefigures his later idea of the 'clerisy', and on these grounds it is fair to accept at face value Coleridge's late assertion of his consistency regarding 'the advancement of humanity':

> From the very outset I hoped in no advancement of humanity but from individual minds and morals working onward from Individual to Individual – in short, from the *Gospel*. This in my first work, the *Conciones ad Populum*, I declared, in my 23rd year: and to this I adhere in my present 63rd. (*LPR*, 44n)

It is important to distinguish, however, between the tone of Coleridge's criticism of the Ministries, and the course of action that he advocated. The former is often bold, sardonic, and accusatory, sometimes promising the wrath of heaven as punishment. It is not difficult to sustain accusations of Jacobinism if the tone of such passages is the guide, or indeed the context of publication as Everest points out. However, it has been recognised since at least John Colmer's discussion of Coleridge's politics, that despite the fury of Coleridge's political rhetoric, he is quietist and constitutional in his recommendations for reform.[60] It is this latter aspect of his work that Coleridge appears to have emphasised, when he suggests that he was never 'a Convert to the System' of Jacobinism.[61]

More recently a conservative view of Coleridge's so-called radicalism has been

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[58] See also *The Plot Discovered* in which Coleridge presents the introduction of the 'Gagging Acts' as 'ministerial treason' (*LPR*, 278ff).
[59] *LPR*, 40.
[60] Colmer's argument is discussed in chapter three.
[61] *Friend* ii 146.

forwarded by Jon Mee. His reading of Coleridge is in the context of an in-depth study of the 'cultural importance of enthusiasm in the Romantic period'.[62] He explores the poetics of enthusiasm in Coleridge's writing, and argues that he worked 'tirelessly [...] to distinguish pathological from noble enthusiasm'.[63] Coleridge achieves this, Mee argues, by the philosophical grounding of his religious and political ideas in associationism, and in the Bible:

> In the present state of society, only the Bible, propagated with a combination of zeal and philosophy by leaders such as himself, could provide improvement in the moral condition of the poor, and this improvement had to precede any participation for them in politics. The alternative, Coleridge believed, was to see reform left to the delirium of the crowd.[64]

Mee goes on to demonstrate how Coleridge defined himself against other radicals such as Richard Brothers, 'the Great Prophet of Paddington Street', who was imprisoned in a lunatic asylum for his alleged treasonable practices. Coleridge joked about the matter to George Dyer: 'Poor *Brothers*! They'll make him know the *Law* as well as the *Prophets*!'[65] This indicates, Mee argues, that 'Coleridge perceived himself as sharing a conception of the public sphere with the government that necessarily excluded enthusiasts such as Brothers'.[66]

Mee's arguments are persuasive in their own terms, and he is correct to identify Coleridge more closely with the government than with the enthusiasm of the working classes, in terms of the means of political change. The key factor here is Coleridge's education and the centrality of a rationalistic methodology in his religious lecturing. The problem with Mee's analysis is that he contracts the complex cultural associations

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[62] Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.1. Hereafter *Romanticism and Enthusiasm*.
[63] Ibid, p.132.
[64] Ibid, p.142.
[65] *CL* i. 156.
[66] *Romanticism and Enthusiasm*, p.144.

with 'enthusiasm' in the first part of his book, into a somewhat reduced form when discussing Coleridge specifically. The Coleridge that emerges would be difficult to distinguish politically from either Priestley or William Paley for example. Moreover Mee sees Coleridge's religion simply as a regulative ideology, a bulwark against the unsettling consequences of abandoning traditional, and so conservative, forms of social structure. This is only one aspect of Coleridge's idea of religion, and does not take into account the growing subtlety of his understanding and experience. This is a point well made by Christopher S. Noble, commenting on the conversation poems:

> The desire for religious authorization constantly wavers between, on the one hand, bursts of eloquent 'definitions' that purport to say what cannot be said, to systematize a divine reality, and, on the other hand, ever more subtle definitions are provisional and that what really matters is everyday Christian practice.[67]

Examining Coleridge's early writing on religion might lead one to suspect that Mee is correct in seeing only a regulative mechanism. As discussed in chapters three and four, Coleridge's drive to make the 'system of Christ' a viable and superior political alternative to Godwin, leads to some grand claims for the perfectibility of society under the influence of religion. But as Coleridge matured through the decade, Christianity became more than an ideological framework to be traded in the intellectual marketplace with other radical and conservative ideologies, and as Noble suggests, this may be discerned in his writing.

Whereas Everest tends to see Coleridge as being politically radical, even during retirement, Mee approaches Coleridge as essentially conservative even in spite of his pronounced antiministerial fervour. Clearly these discussions struggle to give definitive accounts of Coleridge's political identity, but this is hardly surprising given

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[67] Christopher S. Noble, 'A Transcendent and Pragmatic Vision: Samuel Taylor Coleridge at the Borders of Christian Orthodoxy', *Christianity and Literature*, 48 (1998), 29-43 (p.279).

the complexity of the political character of the decade, and Coleridge's varied responses to it. The terminology used to locate political identity, as I have been discussing, was often crude and hugely dependent on the motives of the observer. This is particularly true of those who were on the radical end of the political spectrum as they were obliged to be cautious in their writing. Magnuson discusses this sensitively with regard to Coleridge's last contribution to politics before going to Germany, *Fears in Solitude*:

> The language of politics in Coleridge's dialogue with the reactionary press is tempered to suit the intentions of those who use and abuse it. If Coleridge seems to oscillate and to move easily from side to side, it is in part because his writing was entering a public discourse of duplicity, one in which his works were certain to be misread and mistaken. While the conservatives who attacked him and the other radicals could parade without ambiguity their principles and ideology, the radicals including Coleridge were forced to be more cautious. Coleridge's oscillations could be read as the acrobatic feat of remaining in the public debates, when other radical voices had been silenced or exiled.[68]

This thesis contributes to this vexed discussion by offering a detailed account of Coleridge's dissenting ministry across the period. By approaching the material in terms of his ministry, a nexus of themes may be traced that offer a subtle analysis of the changes that occurred over the period. Whilst Coleridge's political activism certainly abated when he moved to Nether Stowey, a comparison of his work before and after the move does not show that he gained poetic maturity simply by abandoning political commitment. Quite apart from the influence of explicitly political factors that have been discussed above, Coleridge matured in a number of ways. Whereas in the 1795 lectures he tended to see religion as a Unitarian moral code whose value could be proved by rational argument, by 1798 he increasingly experienced religion as a 'scheme of redemption' that he did not fully understand, but felt a profound need for. In attempting to formulate this, he began to abandon the

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[68] *Politics of 'Frost at Midnight'*, p.7.

doctrine of perfectibility, and sense value in the doctrine of original sin.

His political thinking, not surprisingly, became more complex also. He no longer sought to explain all the problems of society by appealing to singular causes, such as 'Property' (when, for example, he formulated the Pantisocracy). The slogans of liberty that had attended the French Revolution and seemed to promise so much, appeared rather differently nearly ten years later when much of Europe was at war and the democratic republic of France appeared to want to suppress both its own people and the surrounding nations. Necessarily Coleridge responded to this, and had been responding throughout a complex period of political history, and a centrally important phase of his life.

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'We Preached Pantisocracy and Aspheterism Everywhere'[69]

Coleridge's Early Ministry

Writing to George Coleridge in January 1792, Coleridge promised to send a parcel 'which (*you may depend on it as a certainty*) will contain your sermon. I hope you will like it'.[70] Griggs comments that 'apparently Coleridge was in the habit of preparing sermons for his brother', and to have formed such a habit at the age of nineteen suggests Coleridge's aptitude for the Church ministry.[71] Evidently George suspected that the smooth course through Cambridge and into the Church might be compromised by the influence of William Frend, but Coleridge's response later in the letter could hardly have set him at ease:

> Mr Frend's company is by no means invidious. [...] Tho' I am not an *Alderman*, I have yet *prudence* enough to *respect* that *gluttony of Faith* waggishly yclept Orthodoxy.

Nothing is known of the sermon or of George's opinion of it, but it is not difficult to imagine his disquiet at Coleridge's comments on Frend and the Church. To consider the Church doctrines a 'gluttony of Faith' suggests Coleridge's growing interest in the much reduced theology of Unitarianism. Similarly Coleridge's Spenserian diction may imply that he understands the Church to be little different from Roman

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[69] Robert Southey, *New Letters of Robert Southey*, ed. Kenneth Curry, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), i. 96.
[70] *CL* i. 20.
[71] *Ibid*, 20.

Catholicism.[72] The prudent respect that Coleridge emphasises, however, relates generally to the college requirements to conform to Anglican worship, and more specifically to subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to matriculate. The course of Coleridge's life over the succeeding three years, however, showed anything but prudence. A year after writing the above letter he was in a miserable condition having enlisted in the army, as an attempted plan of escape from financial and emotional despair. Two years after the letter he embarked upon a series of lectures in Bristol to attempt to raise money to support his emigration to America, and in which his criticism of the Church is vociferous. And, it should be noted, in which he fiercely condemns the war that he might have fought in as a soldier. Three years later he was raising subscription for his political periodical *The Watchman*, by preaching from dissenting pulpits. By this time he had established himself an impressive reputation, Nicholas Roe has described:

> By the end of 1795 and the debate about Pitt's and Grenville's repressive 'Gagging Acts', Coleridge's stature was comparable to – and certainly not less than – that of leading figures of metropolitan radicalism such as Godwin and Holcroft, Thelwall, Dyer, and Coleridge's former hero at Jesus College, William Frend. It was Coleridge's considerable reputation in these London circles that also proved to be one factor in attracting Wordsworth to Bristol in August 1795.[73]

Coleridge's erratic course during this period must have exasperated George, and despite the considerable achievement in transforming himself from despair and dejection into a public figure (and beginning to gain himself a reputation as a poet as well), radical politics and religion would not have gained George's approval.

The pivotal event in this transformation came through the chance meeting with

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[72] Two years later, in the lectures, Coleridge would write: 'He who sees any real difference between the Church of Rome and the Church of England possesses optics which I do not possess – the mark of antichrist is on both of them.' (*LPR*, 210).

[73] *Radical Years*, p.117.

Southey in June 1794: the 'System' of Pantisocracy. Within weeks of laying down the foundational principles for the System, they began 'preaching' it as a means 'to regenerate the whole complexion of society'.[74] Coleridge was the most active and enthusiastic of the pair, discussing it with an extraordinary range of people that included locals he fell in with in a Welsh alehouse; undergraduates at Cambridge; intellectuals at Cambridge; and radicals in London. According to Southey, Pantisocracy and 'aspheterism' became 'words well understood in the city of Bristol'.[75] The nature of this rapid development from conception to promotion of the System, is the subject of this chapter.

The core of the System was a rejection of privately owned property, and as such resembled William Godwin's challenge to the relationship between property and political power. Indeed comparisons with Godwin have resulted in, what I consider to be, the misleading critical representation of the Pantisocracy as an extremely radical proposal. As I will argue, the Pantisocracy was predicated on emigration and was not an attempt to apply the principles of holding property in common to any existing society. Consequently it resembles retirement rather than radicalism.

It is all the more surprising, therefore, that Coleridge preached the System with an evangelical fervour to so many in England. He did not present it simply as the future of a select group of Pantisocrats, but as a scheme created 'for the sake of mankind'.[76] This extraordinary projection of the scheme is due to Coleridge's understanding of the System as the literal enactment of Christ's teaching on property. As such he hoped that at some distant point in the future, all societies would voluntarily put their faith in the 'system of no property'. And as the Bristol Lectures make clear, this faith would

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[74] Joseph Cottle, *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey* (London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1847), pp.2-3. Hereafter *Cottle*.
[75] *Southey's Letters*, i. 96.
[76] *CL* i. 166.

come about not by revolution or even any governmental decree, but by the accumulative effect of renunciation at the individual level.

The chapter begins by setting the Pantisocracy in the context of the six month period prior Coleridge and Southey meeting one another. It is a period during which Coleridge 'manifests his penchant for self-analysis' in a series of fascinating letters written whilst he was serving in the army.[77] They are the most revealing accounts of the development of Coleridge's mind during the Cambridge period, and in them he confesses his unsteady faith. He describes a conflict between his sceptical reasoning and the devotion of his heart, and perhaps more significantly laments the power of his Imagination to distract him from steady commitment. The process of analysis is both compelling and consolatory to him, and through it he exhibits a tendency to present himself as a victim of external forces.

i. 'Theories of Escape'[78]

Coleridge earnestly desired Southey to accept all events as divinely ordained, in order to overcome his 'indignation at weakness'. Writing in December 1794 Coleridge implored, 'I would ardently that you were a Necessitarian – and (believing in an all-loving Omnipotence) an Optimist'.[79] Coleridge's own commitment to 'optimism' was an essential part of his arguments concerning the 'problem of evil', in the lectures he was to start delivering a month after writing this letter.[80]

A little over a year earlier, however, Coleridge was far from confident of a happy outcome to his problems. On 7 November 1793 the *Morning Chronicle* published

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[77] *CL* i. 1209.
[78] *CL* i. 133.
[79] *CL* i. 145.
[80] 'Reasoning strictly and with logical Accuracy I should deny the existence of any Evil, inasmuch as the end determines the nature of the means and I have been able to discover nothing of which the end is not good' (*LPR*, 105).

Coleridge's poem 'To Fortune' in which he prays to the 'Promptress of unnumber'd sighs' to unbind her eyes, look upon his fate, and 'rear | One Flower of Hope'; which is to say, to give him the winning ticket in the Irish Lottery.[81] But his apostrophe was deaf to his calls, and things went from bad to worse when Coleridge enlisted in the 15th Light Dragoons on 2 December.[82]

Initially attempting to effectively disappear, and using a pseudonym, by February Coleridge's situation was desperate and so he contacted an old friend from Christ's Hospital, G. L. Tuckett. Coleridge, who described himself as an 'indocile equestrian', suffered greatly from the saddle and in consequence of which he was left behind when his dragoon decamped. This was no soft option, however, as he was effectively incarcerated with a contagious and dying man:

> I was conveyed to Henly [sic] upon Thames – which place our Regiment left last Tuesday – but I was ordered to remain – on account of those dreadfully troublesome eruptions, which so grimly constellated my Posteriors – and that I might nurse my Comrade, who last Friday sickened of the confluent small Pox. [...] The almost total want of Sleep, the putrid smell and the fatiguing Struggles with my poor Comrade during his delirium are nearly too much for me in my present state – [...] mine is a sensibility gangrened with inward corruption, and the keen searching of the air from without! (*CL* i. 62-3).

It is remarkable that in this appalling and dangerous external situation, Coleridge still turns to analyse his internal condition with almost equal gravity. There is a strange, but characteristic, hint of revelry in the rendering of this gothic scene. The disease and incarceration which he finds about him becomes the imagery he uses to depict his inner state of mind. As with the poem 'To Fortune', his despair was not such that it dampened his literary inventiveness, because the communication of his despair

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[81] ll. 1 & 20-1, 'To Fortune: On Buying a Ticket in the Irish Lottery', *Keach*, p.49.
[82] *CL* i. 66. My account of Coleridge's army period is indebted to Earl Leslie Griggs, 'Coleridge the Dragoon', *Modern Philology*, 28 (1931), 470-75; and Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp.53-8.

brought consolation to Coleridge. He made a habit of detaching himself from his immediate experience, and reflecting on his own suffering, deriving a troubled pleasure from it: 'there is a pleasure doubtless an exquisite pleasure mingled up in the most painful of our virtuous Emotions', he told Tuckett in the same letter. It is not surprising in view of this that he would go on to regularly divulge intimate details of his physical and mental health throughout his life, most particularly in the more private media of his letters and notebooks.[83]

This tendency to develop an objective distance from his immediate experience was often a stage in a process of deriving laws of human nature from his analysis. For example over the succeeding couple of years, he codified his pleasure in reflection into a theory of the ameliorating effects of describing melancholy. In December 1794, he wrote to Southey in order to experience the relief of communicating his woes:

> I sit down to write you, not that I have any thing particular to say – but it is a relief, and forms a very respectable part in my Theory of Escapes from the Folly of Melancholy. I am so habituated to philosophizing, that I cannot divest myself of it even when my own Wretchedness is the subject. I appear to myself like a sick Physician, feeling the pang acutely, yet deriving a wonted pleasure from examining its progress and developing its causes. (*CL* i. 133).

Just over a year later, writing in the preface to his first volume of poems to justify the prevalence of verse prompted by 'the more violent emotions of Sorrow', the 'Theory of Escapes' has become 'a benevolent law of our nature':

> The communicativeness of our nature leads us to describe our own sorrows; in the endeavour to describe them intellectual activity is exerted; and by a benevolent law of our nature from intellectual activity a pleasure results which is gradually associated and mingles as a corrective with the painful subject of the description. (p.vii, *1796*).

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[83] His poetry also reflects his preoccupation with his troubled states of mind, notably 'Dejection: An Ode' and 'The Pains of Sleep'.

This desire to analyse and communicate is clearly a good disposition for a would-be preacher. The states of anxiety which often inform his writing, however, testify to an intense and volatile inner life less suitable for a ministry, with the expectation to set a pious and regular example to a congregation. Coleridge was, in some ways, closer to a confessant than a confessor, whose inner life was liable to eclipse external concerns. As he wrote to George, in the depths of self-absorption and misery in the army: 'to me, who have suffered so acutely from the diseases of the inward man, externals have lost much of the formidable'.[84]

Most of the letters written from the army are addressed to George, and in them three themes recur: confessional reflections on his unsteady religious faith; his thoughts on redeeming himself; and his habit of imagining schemes to mitigate his problems. Regarding the former, the letters register a conflict between his mind and his heart: 'Scepticism had mildewed my hope in the Saviour [and though] far from disbelieving the Truth of revealed Religion [I was] still farther from a steady Faith'.[85] Three weeks later on 4 March 1794, Coleridge goes further:

> I have little *Faith*, yet am wonderfully fond of speculating on mystical schemes – Wisdom may be gathered from the maddest flights of Imagination, as medicines were stumbled upon in the wild processes of Alchemy. (*CL* i. 71)

As will be seen, he was not consistent in blessing his Imagination as the course of serendipitous wisdom. A somewhat more sober-minded letter of 30 March contains his most explicit statement of faith, or lack of it, and proposes energetic argument rather than mystical schemes as a way to address his uncertainty:

> I long ago theoretically and in a less degree experimentally knew the necessity of Faith

[84] *CL* i. 70.
[85] *CL* i. 65.

> in order to regular [sic. regulate?] Virtues – nor did I ever seriously disbelieve the existence of a future State – In short, my religious Creed bore and perhaps bears a correspondence with my mind and heart – I had too much Vanity to be altogether a Christian – too much tenderness of Nature to be utterly an Infidel. [...] My Heart forced me to admire the beauty of Holiness in the Gospel, forced me to *love* the Jesus, whom my Reason (or perhaps my *reasonings*) would not permit me to *worship* – My Faith therefore was made up of the Evangelists and the Deistic Philosophy – a kind of *religious Twilight* – I said – *perhaps bears* – Yes! my Brother – for who can say – *Now* I'll be a Christian – Faith is neither altogether voluntary, or involuntary – We cannot believe what we choose – but we can certainly cultivate such habits of thinking and acting, as will give force and effective Energy to the Arguments on either side. (*CL* i. 78)

The profusion of dashes joining the slightly discontinuous development of his thoughts suggests that this is a candid confession. The fragmentation in his religious views is remarkable in the context of the emphatic avowal of Unitarian Christianity in the lectures a year later. The letter registers distinctions between theory and experience, and between his head and his heart, held together only by an uncertain 'correspondence': a choice of word suggesting both separation, and perhaps the need to write in order to create coherence. He could not worship Jesus due to his Reason or reasonings: a distinction suggesting uncertainty as to whether the doctrine of Christ's divinity is contrary to Reason, or made so by the power of wit and argument ('reasonings').

Perhaps most significant of all is the sense of his partial impotence to hold faith by will alone. Although this letter represents an attempt to state his 'religious Creed', he also expresses doubt regarding the effectiveness of doing so: 'faith is neither altogether voluntary, or involuntary'. Consequently he does not commit to a creed at all, but to giving 'force and effective Energy to the Arguments on either side'. Arguments are a response to his uncertainty in other words. This explains how his faith could be made up of revealed religion ('the Evangelists') and the 'Deistic Philosophy' at the same time. As will be seen in the third chapter, in the lectures Coleridge does not voice any doubts and is forthright in his commitment to

determining faith on the basis of assenting to rational propositions about the evidences of Christianity:

> As a rational being, I must become a Christian on the same principles that I believe the doctrine of Gravitation, and with the same confidence that I do a sum in addition or subtraction. (*LPR*, 176).

Whilst still in the army, however, and in the more intimate medium of a family letter, he expresses feelings that make it clear that Coleridge was more than just a rational being.

A second recurring theme in these letters is repentance. In the following extract it is significant to note how Coleridge does not discuss his own repentance so much as the process of repentance. He objectifies it, is pessimistic of its effect, and then turns to the first person to register his feeling of permanent corruption:

> Repentance may bestow that tranquillity, which will enable man to pursue a course of undeviating harmlessness, but it can not restore to the mind that inward sense of Dignity, which is the parent of every kindling Energy! – I am not, what I was: – *Disgust* – I *feel*, as if it had – jaundiced all my Faculties.
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> I laugh almost like an insane person when I cast my eye backward on the prospect of my past two years – What a gloomy *Huddle* of eccentric Actions, and dim-discovered motives! Happiness I bade adieu from the moment, I received my first Tutor's Bill – since that time my Mind has been irradiated by Bursts only of Sunshine – at all other times gloomy with clouds, or turbulent with tempests. Instead of manfully disclosing the disease, I concealed it with a shameful Cowardice of sensibility, till it cankered my very Heart. (*CL* i. 67).

Coleridge's discussion of 'repentance', as being unable to restore a full sense of dignity, may be read sceptically as an expression of his contrition for the sake of evoking sympathy and financial support (his need for money is a feature of every letter he writes to George at this time). It is also tempting to regard the self-consciously literary treatment of his predicament – 'happiness I bade adieu from the moment, I received my first Tutor's Bill' – as bathetic and insincere. It is clear,

however, that Coleridge had a lifelong difficulty in dealing with the force of his responses to his unsteady and often miserable course through life. In feeling himself permanently changed ('I am not, what I was'), jaundiced through *all* his faculties, and possessing a cankered heart, he expresses an unfortunate weakness in handling his emotions, and an inconsistent ability to make practical and sensible decisions when oppressed by his negative feelings.[86]

A characteristic response to such situations was a desire for total change, and in a letter to George in late February, he presents this tendency as escapism, the third theme in these letters:

> The time, which I should have bestowed on the academic studies, I employed in dreaming out wild Schemes of impossible extrication. It had been better for me, if my Imagination had been less vivid – I could not with such facility have shoved aside Reflection! How many and how many hours have I stolen from the bitterness of Truth in these soul-enervating Reveries – in building magnificent Edifices of Happiness on some fleeting Shadow of Reality! (*CL* i. 67).

This explanation begins with a straight-forward account of misspent opportunities and wilful neglect of responsibilities. He goes on, however, to present himself almost as a victim of his Imagination, without the volition to resist its reveries. A fortnight later he is more explicit in presenting himself as a victim of his own Imagination: 'I have been, deeply do I feel that I have been the dupe of my Imagination, the slave of Impulse, the child of Error and Imbecillity'.[87] This equivocal relationship with his Imagination would be dramatically represented a little over a year later in 'The Eolian Harp', but thereafter Coleridge would go on to treat the Imagination in more hallowed

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[86] Perhaps the best example of his excessive self-condemnation, relates to the feelings of guilt arising from his drug habit. See for example *CL* iii. 511: 'I used to think the text in St. James that "he who offended in one point, offends in all," very harsh; but I now feel the awful, the tremendous truth of it. In the one crime of OPIUM, what crime have I not made myself guilty of!'

[87] *CL* i 73 (to George Cornish, 12 March 1794).

terms.[88]

Towards the end of his spell in the army, Coleridge begins to reflect on the episode in a more optimistic light. In a letter dated 23 March, he appears to be trying to persuade George that the period was a necessary awakening for him, to bring about a new start. Characteristically he does not speak directly of his own experiences, but of the general necessity of the 'human mind' for a purgatorial shock to the system:

> There is a vis inertiae in the human mind – I am convinced that a man once corrupted will ever remain so, unless some sudden revolution, some unexpected change of Place or Station shall have utterly altered his connection. When these Shocks of adversity have electrified his moral frame, he feels a convalescence of soul, and becomes like a being recently formed from the hand of Nature. (*CL* i. 74)

The born-again Coleridge was discharged on 10 April on the grounds of 'insanity',[89] and initially he dutifully returned to Cambridge. It must have been somewhat humiliating given the reputation he had gained some months before: 'I became a proverb to the University for Idleness', he told his brother.[90] However, as Richard Holmes puts it, he 'played the role of the penitent prodigal with conviction':

> Outwardly he was full of good resolutions: having sat for the Rustat Exam and got a credit, he would now study hard, contend 'for all the Prizes', and compile his slim volume of *Imitations from the Modern Latin Poets* to pay off his debts. (It was advertised in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* for June, but never appeared.) He would 'solemnly' drop all unsuitable college friends, rise at six o'clock every morning, forswear wine parties and politics, and practise a 'severe Economy'. 'Every enjoyment – except of *necessary* comforts – I look upon as criminal'. Even in his Greek verse he would now aim at 'correctness & perspicuity, not *genius*'. (*Early Visions*, p.59)

Soon, however, Coleridge's all too vivid Imagination took over. By June he was

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[88] 'The Eolian Harp' was written in the summer of 1795, but published in *1796* as 'Effusion xxxv'. The title 'The Eolian Harp' was given in 1817 (along with the additional 'One Life' section). I have kept the later title (as it is almost universally used by critics), but all references in this thesis are to the version as it appears in *1796*.

[89] Cf *CL* i. 76n.

[90] *CL* i 67.

setting out with a friend on a walking tour of Wales, but stopping off in Oxford and by chance meeting Southey. Southey was reluctantly heading for the clergy, but was repelled by the institution, and so the idea of emigrating appealed to him.[91] Together they began to formulate their scheme for the creation of a community based on the rejection of private ownership of property ('aspheterism'), and governed by all ('Pantisocracy'). The idea originated with Southey and Coleridge supplied the jargon. Celebrating this new direction in a sonnet written in September 1794, Coleridge hoped to turn his back on 'the Shame and Anguish of the evil Day, | Wisely forgetful!'[92]

ii. 'Religion and a small company of chosen individuals'[93]

The 'leading features' of the System were drawn up in Coleridge's three-week stay in Oxford, having met Southey for the first time, in June 1794. No matter how much subsequent research Coleridge did in order to make the System viable or to authenticate it with scriptural parallels, there is no escaping from the plain fact that Coleridge and Southey were seriously planning to emigrate and begin a new life as enlightened agriculturalists, on the basis of a friendship of less than a month's standing.[94] His certainty that such matters were secondary to the perfection of rational principles is most unfortunately displayed in his decision to marry Sara Fricker 'from Principle not feelings'.[95]

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[91] This is clear from Southey's letters written in the six months prior to meeting Coleridge. See Nicolas Roe, 'Pantisocracy and the Myth of the Poet', in Tim Fulford, ed., *Romanticism and Millennium* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp.87-102 (pp. 89-93).
[92] 'Pantisocracy', ll.3-4, *Keach*.
[93] *Friend* i. 224
[94] He would write to Dyer within a year, 'we formed our American Plan, and with precipitance that did credit to our hearts rather than heads' (*CL* i. 151).
[95] *CL* i. 164.

Almost immediately Coleridge approached the System as a vocation. Through it he could drop university, avoid a career in the 'ministry', leave behind the embarrassments caused by his 'gloomy *Huddle* of eccentric Actions', and more positively, through which he hoped to raise funds: 'Literary Characters make *money* there' he told Southey.[96]

Its effect on Coleridge was like a narcotic: 'I have positively done nothing but dream of the System of no Property every step of the Way since I left you' he told Southey a few weeks after hatching the plan.[97] Moreover, he did not see Pantisocracy as simply the answer to his own problems but to those of 'mankind', by 'setting an example of "Human Perfectibility"'. [98]

This extraordinary and unlikely ambition was not a later projection of the scheme, but was an implicit part of the original conception. This is clear from Coleridge's description of an incident that occurred on the walking tour of Wales immediately succeeding the formation of the plan. On seeing 'a little Girl with a half-famished sickly Baby in her arms', Coleridge triumphantly predicted to Southey, 'when the pure System of Pantocracy [the prototype name for the scheme] shall have aspheterized the Bounties of Nature, these things will not be so'.[99]

This episode and its triumphant conclusion could have been poignantly amusing in the hands of Voltaire, but Coleridge's earnest projection is somewhat ridiculous. A letter written a week later contains another rose-tinted anecdote:

> I preached Pantisocracy and Aspheterism with so much success that two great huge Fellows, of Butcherlike appearance, danced about the room in enthusiastic agitation – And one of them of his own accord called for a large Glass of Brandy, and drank it off to this, his own Toast – God save the King. And may he be the Last – Southey! Such

[96] *CL* i. 97.
[97] *CL* i. 90.
[98] *Cottle*, pp.2-3.
[99] *CL* i. 83-4.

men may be of use. (*CL* i. 88)

This episode testifies to Coleridge's powers of persuasion rather than any realistic appeal to such folk: the scheme was created for the educated, and had as little to offer 'butcherlike' fellows as it did starving babies. The principal benefit of the scheme at this time was in giving Coleridge a cause to defend and promote, rather than the world a new social order. He could put behind him the fragmentation of his recent life, plough his energies into a project that engaged and animated him, and Coleridge's excitement at this new integrity in his life is abundantly clear in his letters to Southey. In the following extract from a letter of September 1794, Coleridge celebrates the union of head and heart in the project, with the former supplying the rationale, and the latter inspiring the 'fiery Spirit':

> Pantisocracy – O I shall have such a scheme of it! My head, my heart are all alive – I have drawn up my arguments in battle array – they shall have the *Tactician* Excellence of the Mathematician with the Enthusiasm of the Poet – The Head shall be the Mass – the Heart the fiery Spirit, that fills, informs, and agitates the whole. (*CL* i. 103).

Coleridge's evangelism was soon directed not at labourers but the learned circles to which he was accustomed. In the same letter he would describe himself as 'a madman of Genius [who] arose terrible in Reasoning' when laughed at by Cambridge undergraduates over the scheme. His actions over the previous year must have made him seem eccentric if not mad, but the System helped him to ride the humiliation, and boast in the letter of the madness that had co-authored a new foundation for society. Higher up the intellectual ladder, he convinced George Dyer that the system was 'impregnable', and a month later, received the same affirmation from two Cambridge intellectuals.[100] On this later occasion Coleridge returned to his rooms high on his

[100] *CL* i. 98 & 119.

performance:

> I came home at one o'clock this morning exulting in the honest Consciousness of having exhibited closer argument in more elegant and appropriate Language, than I had ever conceived myself capable of. (*CL* i. 119)

Perhaps most significantly, however, the System gave Coleridge a theme for his discussions with the London radicals Godwin and Holcroft, in December 1794. A few months earlier Coleridge had expressed his dissent from Southey's high opinion of Godwin, and described his projected book of the System, which would include aspects of Godwin:

> In the book of Pantisocracy I hope to have comprised all that is good in Godwin – of whom and of whose book I will write more fully in my next letter. (I think not so highly of him as you do – and I have read him with the greatest attention). (*CL* i. 115)

Coleridge does not record his discussions of the System with Godwin, but the following humorous account of his arguments with Holcroft vividly reveals the extent to which Coleridge saw Pantisocracy as a serious alternative to the ideas of the leading radicals of the day. Robert Lovell, a Pantisocrat who married Sara Fricker's sister Mary, evidently had discussed the System with Holcroft, and Coleridge got his opportunity whilst dining with the editors of the *Morning Chronicle*, James Gray and James Perry, and at their house on 16 December 1794:

> I dined yesterday with Perry, and Grey (the proprieters & Editors of the Morning Chronicle) at their House – and met Holcroft – He either misunderstood Lovell, or Lovell misunderstood him, I know not which – but it is very clear to me, that neither of them understand or enter into the *views* of our System. Holcroft *opposes* it violently - & thinks it not *virtuous*. [...]
> I had the honor [sic.] of *working* H.[olfcroft] a little – and by my great *coolness* and command of impressive Language certainly *did him over* – / Sir! (said he) I never knew so much real wisdom – & so much rank Error meet in one mind before! Which (answered I) means, I suppose – that in some things, Sir! I agree with you and in others

I do not.
He absolutely infests you with *Atheism*. (*CL* i. 138-9)

December 1794 was certainly an extraordinary month for the young college dropout. To mix with radicals of such notoriety must have contributed to Coleridge's education in a way that Cambridge could not have done. Coleridge's revulsion towards their religious views appears to have precipitated an outpouring of religious apologetics. A week or so after meeting Godwin and Holcroft he begin writing 'Religious Musings', and over the following months he would deliver the Bristol Lectures. The political lectures would be conflated and published in November 1795 as *Conciones ad Populum*, his 'first lay sermon, and in which he would argue that in the 'barbarous tumult of inimical Interests, which the present state of Society exhibits, *Religion* appears to offer the only means universally *efficient*.'[101]

As well as their religious differences, Godwin and Coleridge held different views on property: Godwin urged the equalisation of property whereas Coleridge proposed the 'System of no Property', which is to say, all property would be held in common.[102] It is impossible to tell for certain whether Coleridge derived this attitude towards property from the scriptures or whether he latterly sought scriptural justification for it; the latter seems more likely, however, given that the original idea for the system was Southey's. But Coleridge seems to have understood it as a religious proposal, telling Southey that he 'preached' the scheme within weeks of their meeting, suggesting that disseminating the ideas was essentially religious instruction.[103] It is useful, however, to consider in what way the System could be said to be religious.

The most detailed contemporary account of the System may be found in a letter Tom Poole wrote to his brother, having spent the afternoon with 'Coldridge' and Southey

[101] *LPR*, 43-4.
[102] *CL* i. 90.
[103] Cf. *CL* i. 88 (quoted above).

on 22 September 1794.[104] Poole records that the System would not be constitutionally religious:

> Everyone is to enjoy his own religious and political opinions, provided they do not encroach on the rules previously made, which rules, it is unnecessary to add, must in some measure be regulated by the laws of the state which includes the district in which they settle. (*Poole and His Friends*, p.69).

At no point does Coleridge discuss worship or any ritualised form of Christianity in his descriptions of the System. This is notable because, as the army letters show, Coleridge felt the need for a habit of confession in order to deal with his inner turmoil. Although he dealt with this through writing principally, it is perhaps an early indication of Coleridge's developing belief in original sin, and the value of addressing this ritualistically.[105] The Pantisocracy was, however, an 'experiment in human perfectability [sic.]', and as such was committed to a progressive view of human nature for which Church and State could only be obstructions.[106] Robert Hole has drawn attention to these distinct positions and their political consequences:

> Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and Old Dissenters all saw man as an unregenerate, fallen creature who was, on earth, necessarily imperfect. Nothing influences a person's views about politics and society more than his beliefs and assumptions about the nature of man. [...] Priestley, however, rejected the doctrine of original sin. Man, he believed, was a being capable of achieving perfection, and Priestley related this belief both to his doctrine of progress and to his millenarian views. The world was destined to improve wonderfully in knowledge, virtue and happiness and the changes would lead to an earthly paradise. Paine also believed in the essential goodness of man; it was the existing form of society that was evil, and government which corrupted human nature.[107]

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[104] Quoted in Elizabeth Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends*, ed. Reginald Watters (Macmillan, 1888; repr. Over Stowey: Friarn, 1996), pp.68-9.

[105] In the letter quoted above, Coleridge describes his sensibility as 'gangrened with inward corruption' (*CL* i. 62), but not until 1798 did he state his belief in original sin: 'I believe most steadfastly in original Sin' (*CL* i. 396).

[106] *Friend*, i. 224. Coleridge wrote to George in November 1794, describing his 'intense study of Locke, Hartley and others who have written most wisely on the Nature of Man' (*CL* i. 126). Locke and Hartley were the two principal philosophers underpinning perfectibility.

[107] Robert Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order in England: 1760-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; repr. 2004), pp.142-3. Hereafter *Pulpits and Politics*.

The reference to Paine raises an important point regarding perfectibility: although rational dissenters tended to view human nature as perfectible, non-theists such as Paine and Godwin held the same view. Both men looked to the conditions in which people lived as the cause of social ills, believing that if these were reformed in accordance with the dictates of reason, human nature would be unrestrained in its progress to perfection. Coleridge believed his System would succeed on the same principle: 'the leading Idea of Pantisocracy is to make men *necessarily* virtuous by removing all Motives to Evil – all Temptations'.[108] Consequently there would be no need for a ritualised form of religion to address the inner corruption in human nature.

This is not to say that the Pantisocracy should not be considered a religious scheme but by showing that it is based largely on principles shared by secular political radicalism, Coleridge's attempts to present it as religious become clear. And although it is impossible to attribute the particulars of the scheme to one or the other of them, Poole's description of their religious views would suggest that the religious justification for the System came from Coleridge rather than Southey. Of the former Poole wrote that 'he is a Unitarian, if not a Deist', and the latter 'wavers between Deism and Atheism'.[109]

The constitutional religiosity of the System as religious rests largely on parallels with the earliest Christian communities as described in the early chapters of the book of Acts. In the second chapter, Peter baptized many thousands into a community of sharing:

> 'Save yourselves from this untoward generation.' Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand

[108] *CL* i. 114.
[109] *Poole and his Friends*, p.69.

> souls. [...]
> And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2. 40-7)

It is not difficult to see how this call to 'save yourself from this untoward generation' could be translated into a scheme of emigration, and the increasing 'favour with all the people' must have excited Coleridge's hopes that his perfect System might become the envy of those around it. But most significant of all to Coleridge was their sharing all things in common. In the Bristol lectures, Coleridge would quote these verses, adding that 'this part of the Christian Doctrine [...] is indeed almost the whole of it'.[110] This slimmed-down version of Christianity forms a striking contrast with the 'gluttony of faith' Coleridge condemned in the letter to George quoted above.

Coleridge looked back on the System in *The Friend*, explaining that it was 'to have combined the innocence of the patriarchal age with the knowledge and genuine refinements of European culture'.[111] This description could easily apply to Priestley's Unitarian project, and for both him and Coleridge, this focus on the patriarchal age was not on the Church Fathers but on ordinary Christians. The key difference between their appeals to the earliest Christians is that Priestley looked to them in order to understand their Christology and so justify his Unitarianism; Coleridge looked to emulate their economic structure as being the correct reading of Christ's teaching on property ownership.[112]

The account in Acts describes a community numbered in the thousands, but Coleridge chose the more manageable and much more symbolic number of twelve.

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[110] *LPR*, 229.
[111] *Friend* i. 224.
[112] Coleridge's reading of Christ is discussed in more detail in chapters three and four.

There was no inevitability in the choice of the number twelve, in the sense that there were not twelve eligible Pantisocrats waiting in the wings, at the conception of the scheme. It would appear, therefore, that the choice of twelve was specifically intended to echo the symbolic importance of the number in the Bible, and give the System a Christian gloss. As a matter of fact, it is more accurate to consider the number to be twenty four as Poole's letter makes clear: 'Twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles are to embark with twelve ladies in April next'.[113] It is also interesting to note the elitism in the conception of the System. Whereas Christ's disciples 'were of the lowest Class as well as in Station as Abilities' according to Coleridge, the Pantisocrats would be educated gentlemen.[114]

Coleridge presented the System itself as a kind of Christ figure to its disciple Pantisocrats. In Coleridge's notorious and anguished letter to Southey, written in November 1795 when the scheme had finally been abandoned, he glances over 'the History or our connection', and recalls Southey's equal enthusiasm for the project:

> Nor were you less zealous: and thought, and expressed your opinion, that if any man embraced our System, he must comparatively disregard 'his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own Life also': or he could 'not be our disciple'. (*CL* i. 163-4)

The allusion is to the gospel of Luke, a particularly emphatic statement of the uncompromised commitment needed to follow Christ. Family ties are presented as a positive hindrance to discipleship:

> If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.
> For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the

[113] *Poole and his Friends*, p.69.
[114] *LPR*, 161.

> cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14.26-33)

To allude to this passage gives some indication of the religious fervour with which Coleridge approached commitment to the Pantisocracy. Indeed, as authors of the system, Coleridge and Southey appear to have felt that they were more than disciples. As a Unitarian Coleridge laid the stress on the 'system' that Jesus 'authored' rather than his person, and so it appears that, in the plural 'our disciple', Coleridge and Southey esteemed their role as authors of their System highly.

The same extract from the above letter has been discussed by Kelvin Everest but finding it to be an indication of the Godwinian influence:

> Southey's conviction, as recalled in Coleridge's letter, that the disciple of Pantisocracy would never allow the claims of personal and familial affection to override those of a generalised rational benevolence, was thoroughly Godwinian. Godwin's attitude to family affection is epitomised in a famous passage of *Political Justice* (1793), where it is proposed that a perfectly rational, and therefore perfectly benevolent being, confronted with the alternatives of sacrificing either Fenelon or Fenelon's valet, would save Fenelon; even if the valet were oneself, or one's 'wife or mother'.[115]

This reading draws attention to the problem raised above, of trying to identify the sources for the System, when certain principles – in this case 'generalised rational benevolence' – are shared by the religious and non-religious alike.

Whether the source may be found in Godwin, the gospels, or both, it is important to recognise Coleridge's presentation of the System as involving a religious commitment. The implication is that Coleridge believed that his minimal-theology Christianity could be realised in a social structure, uniting his interpretation of the Bible with practise. However, much to Coleridge's growing despair, the System never really

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[115] *Secret Ministry*, p.70.

came close to practical realisation, became almost comically diluted, and in the process largely contradicted the original principles. The symbolic twelve had become a less allusive thirty eight by the time Southey had included his mother in law, servant, the servant's wife and children, and others;[116] the setting changed from the idyllic-sounding Susquehannah to mid-Wales (where they would have to pay tithes to the Church and taxes to the government); the community of goods was rejected when Southey inherited an annuity that he wished to keep separate; and the system finally collapsed when Southey, having resisted two opportunities to join the Church, and one to become a lawyer, chose to travel to Portugal with a rich uncle.

On abandoning the System Southey told Lovell that Coleridge's 'indolence' had decided him, and although stung by the criticism, Coleridge defended the System rather than himself:

> My INDOLENCE you assigned to Lovell as the Reason for your quitting Pantisocracy. Supposing it true, it might indeed be a Reason for rejecting *me* from the System? But how does this affect Pantisocracy, that you should reject *it*? (*CL* i. 171)

Indeed at every stage of the dilution of the System, Coleridge was concerned to preserve the idea in its purity. Within three months of this letter, however, Coleridge would tell Cottle that the System was 'a scheme of Virtue impracticable & romantic', and he held to this judgment thereafter.[117] Writing in *The Friend*, Coleridge attempts to refute accusations of Jacobinism, and discusses his early attitudes towards the relationship between property and government. He cites the Pantisocracy as an instance of the harmless implications of his social and political beliefs:

> I was never myself, at any period of my life, a convert to the [Jacobinical] system.

[116] See Roe, 'Pantisocracy and the Myth of the Poet', p.98.
[117] 22 Feb 1796, (*CL* i. 185).

> From my earliest manhood, it was an axiom in Politics with me, that in every country where property prevailed, property must be the grand basis of the government. [...]
> I was a sharer in the general vortex, though my little world described the path of its revolution in an orbit of its own. What I dared not expect from constitutions of government and whole nations, I hoped from Religion and a small number of chosen individuals, and formed a plan, as harmless as it was extravagant, of trying the experiment of human perfectability [sic.] on the banks of the *Susquehannah*. (*Friend*, pp.223-4)

It initially appears somewhat surprising that Coleridge claims to have advocated property as the basis of government 'from my earliest manhood'. But this is consistent with arguments in the 'Six Lectures on Revealed Religion' delivered in the first months of 1795.[118] Coleridge's scheme was not addressed to any existing society at all, but was an attempt to frame a new society based on a different relationship between property and power. It is highly significant that Coleridge presents the System as an alternative to 'constitutions of government and nations'.

Despite this, many critics have argued that the scheme went further than Godwin in terms of 'property'. Leonard W. Deen is typical: 'Godwin in *Political Justice* urged "equalisation" of property, not community of property. Coleridge's solution was more radical'.[119] Coleridge appears to offer support for this view in his description of the System as an attempt to 'remove the *selfish* Principle from ourselves, and prevent it in our children, by an *Abolition* of Property'.[120] He did not, however, advocate abolition of private property in English society but in the hypothetical community he sought to establish. What would be abolished was any individual claim to what the Pantisocrats held in common. When Coleridge attempted to transfer these ideas to the 'present state of society' in the Bristol lectures, he called for the voluntary renunciation of

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[118] See chapter three.
[119] Leonard W. Deen, 'Coleridge and the Sources of Pantisocracy: Godwin, the Bible, and Hartley', *Boston University Studies in English*, 5 (1961), 232-45 (p.236); see also *Secret Ministry*, p.84; Peter J. Kitson, '"Our Prophetic Harrington": Coleridge, Pantisocracy, and Puritan Utopias', TWC, 24 (1993), 97-102 (pp.97-8); Morrow, John, *Coleridge's Political Thought: Property, Morality and the Limits of Traditional Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp.8-10.
[120] *CL* i. 163.

property and not abolition; not, in other words an attempt to reform society through constitutional change but on an individual basis.[121]

A perhaps more surprising critical tradition has attempted to demonstrate that the System was a practical one, and had the potential to be successful. J. R. MacGillivray, for example, makes an impressive effort to defend the practicality of the authors of the System: 'if Coleridge, and Southey, and their fellows were deluded young men, they were such in the best company and with the best evidential justification'.[122] MacGillivray's research demonstrates the successful precedents for their emigration (Brissot, Cooper, and Priestley), but even so, he does not credit Coleridge with seeing with total clarity:

> To be sure, he had his illusions. He had no very clear notion of where the prerequisite two thousand pounds was to be obtained. He lacked a saving awareness of the intractable old Adam in man – until he saw its workings in his fellow-citizen, Southey. But withal he had a restless energy which they lacked, a persistent faith in the scheme, and a desire to learn everything that was to be known. (MacGillivray, p.162)

The idea that the culprit was 'the intractable old Adam in man' could almost have been written by Coleridge, attempting to affirm a theological doctrine from the collapse of the scheme, whilst excusing the purity of the System itself. And although MacGillivray usefully draws attention to Coleridge's earnest attempts to research thoroughly, it serves to demonstrate Coleridge's characteristic energy for the scheme as an ideal, a set of principles, rather than offering grounds for believing that the scheme – at least in its 'pure' form – could possibly materialise. Coleridge's preparation involved reading books and having conversations (often in ale-houses), neglecting practical matters such as working the ground, constructing property, and so

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[121] Cf. *LPR*, 227-9.

[122] MacGillivray, J. R., 'The Pantisocracy Scheme and its Immediate Background', in *Studies in English: By members of University College, Toronto*, ed. Malcolm W. Wallace (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1931), 131-169 (p.134).

on. He would write a telling confession to Tom Poole in December 1796 of this lack of practical preparation: 'am I not ignorant, as a child, of every thing that concerns the Garden, & the Ground?'[123] Perhaps even more significantly, the levels of trust and conformity that the System would have required, could hardly be expected from a group of young men hardly known to each other. And least realistic of all were Coleridge's projections for the influence of the System on 'mankind'.

Coleridge behaved as an itinerant preacher once the System had been conceived, treating it as a religious cause that would benefit many more than the select group of Pantisocrats. Ultimately it would benefit neither the Pantisocrats nor mankind, and in fact one Pantisocrat, George Burnett, appeared to be positively harmed by it: 'The enchantment of Pantisocracy threw a gorgeous light over the objects of life; but it soon disappeared, and has left *me* in the darkness of ruin'.[124]

Burnett's fate suggests the hypnotic force of Coleridge's eloquence and argument, which were informed by his straining to anticipate flaws in the System. Indeed it appears as though Coleridge suppressed doubts as the fragile purity of the System became threatened. When, for example, he discussed the System with Cambridge intellectuals for six hours (and persuading them of its worth), he confided in a letter to Southey that he was anxious to predict the seeds of error: 'O for that Lyncéan Eye, that can discover in the Acorn of Error the rooted and widely spreading Oak of Misery!'[125] Coleridge anxieties were principally directed at the insufficient 'quantity of *acquired* knowledge' in the growing community of Pantisocrats. This manifested in a remonstrance against the inclusion of children, and which he felt he could not

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[123] *CL* i. 272. On hearing of Coleridge's Stowey plans, Lamb gently mocked his lack of agricultural knowledge: 'Is it a farm you have got? & what does your worship know about farming?' (*LL* i. 87; 1 December 1796).

[124] *Poole and his Friends*, p.228. Burnett became addicted to opium, and 'died in Marylebone Workhouse in 1811, aged thirty-five'. See Rosemary Ashton, *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.82-3.

[125] *CL* i. 119.

mention in Cambridge:

> Southey! – there are *Children* going with us. Why did I never dare in my disputations with the Unconvinced to *hint* at this circumstance? Was it not, because I knew even to certainty of conviction, that it is subversive of *rational* Hopes of a permanent System? These children – the little Fricker for instance and *your* Brothers – Are they not already *deeply* tinged with the prejudices and errors of Society? Have they not learnt from their Schoolfellows *Fear* and *Selfishness* – of which the necessary offspring are Deceit, and desultory Hatred? *How* are we to prevent them from infecting the minds of *our* Children? By reforming their Judgments? – At so early age *can* they have *felt* the ill consequences of their Errors in a manner sufficiently vivid to make this reformation practicable? Reasoning is but *Words* unless where it derives force from the repeated experience of the person, to whom it is addressed. – *How* can we ensure their silence concerning *God* &c - ? Is it possible, *they* should enter into our *motives* for this silence? If not we must produce their *obedience* by *Terror*. [...] I will accompany you on an *imperfect* System. But *must* our System be thus necessarily imperfect? I ask the Question that I may know whether or not I should write the Book of Pantisocracy. (*CL* i. 119-20)

This passage is surely one of the most extraordinary in Coleridge's early correspondence, and demonstrates the absurdity of viewing the Pantisocracy as a System that could eventually benefit mankind. Coleridge understood the scheme to have the potential to function only if the community were rational enough to purify themselves of the corruptions of English society. To constitute the System with suitably rational people meant restricting membership to a degree that it could barely resemble a society at all. The fragile perfection of the System was threatened by the 'despair' and 'hatred' of children, and so the idea that it could possibly expand to encompass society at large is quite obviously unrealistic.

Perhaps most surprising in the above extract is the idea of terrorising children in order to *stop* them speaking of 'God etc.'. Coleridge feared the infiltration of orthodoxy, but this is nevertheless a striking way of expressing his intention to keep religion out of the System. Coleridge wrote to George two weeks after the above letter on 6 November 1794, prophesying that 'the Kingdom of Reason is at hand and

even now cometh!'.[126] Although in context the comment appears to semi-serious, it does reflect Coleridge's idea of religion at this time. He was committed to a rational process, approaching the nature of man and the problems of society as phenomena that could be analysed and perfected through reason. In the course of 'preaching' the Pantisocracy, he attempted to draw out resemblances to Christianity, in what was essentially a secular social constitution.

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Despite the difficulties that attended the scheme of Pantisocracy from its inception to its collapse, it animated Coleridge to lift himself from the torment and despair of his army period. In a very short space of time Coleridge turned his attention from his own messy past, uncertain future, and troubled inner life, to a cause that he took up as a vocation. Not only was he planning to emigrate, but he was telling a great number of people about it, as if the scheme offered them something also. As I have argued, however, the scheme did not offer anything to any existing society except the very distant prospect of it spreading through the enviable perfection of its principles.

The army letters describe a man struggling to maintain stability in his life, but he portrays his struggle as one of internal conflict, and not as the result of the corrupt basis of society. He does not present himself as the victim of a society corrupted by its attachment to private property, but of his own Imagination leading him away from his duties and responsibilities. And yet in his analysis, he has a tendency to objectify the causes of his problems, displacing himself as the agent of his troubles. There is a parallel in the structure of the Pantisocracy. It is an attempt to objectify a single cause

[126] *CL* i. 125.

for the corruptions of society – private property ownership – and then imagine a society without it. The new society would 'necessarily' make its members virtuous, and so shift the agency from the individual to the social constitution.

There are a number of hints that Coleridge was not fully convinced that such automatic virtue could be created through the scheme. In the same letter in which he boasts of 'doing over' Holcroft, he also somewhat melodramatically confesses a lack of integrity between his heart and mind: 'O ye invincible Soldiers of Virtue, who arrange yourselves under the Generalship of Fixed Principles – that you would throw your Fortifications around my Heart!'.[127] It will be recalled that he expresses a similar schism between his head and heart regarding his 'religious Creed' when writing from the army to George. In both cases he attempts to resolve this lack of integrity through argument. Coleridge clung to the idea that a rational system might bring order and control to his life, and it is this impulse that attracted him to Unitarianism.

Throughout 1795 Coleridge poured his energy into articulating his religious creed, initially by delivering his 'Six Lectures on Revealed Religion'. His Bristol Lectures were amongst the most practical steps he took in support of the Pantisocracy, and in them he attempted to integrate his religious ideas and his critique of English society, rather than seeking to create a utopian alternative. This enterprise was hugely indebted to Joseph Priestley, with whom the next chapter is concerned.

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[127] *CL* i. 138.

2

'The Office of a Christian Minister'[1]

The Theory and Practise of Joseph Priestley's Unitarianism

Priestley was a practising dissenting minister for nearly all of his adult life. After completing his education at the Daventry Academy in 1755, there were only two periods in which he was not preaching from the pulpit: from 1761-7 he was a tutor at the Warrington Academy, and from 1773-80, he was librarian to the Earl of Shelburne (1737-1805). He reached a larger audience, of course, through his numerous publications, and although he wrote on a wide range of subjects, the vast majority of his work is theological.

His doctrinal beliefs altered to some extent over the course of his writing, but as a body of work it is remarkably uniform in style and subject matter, and indeed is repetitious. The style is unadorned, evenly paced, and reflects Priestley's distrust of rhetoric. The subject matter is almost always a defence of Unitarianism (a synonym for 'rational Christianity'), against both the 'corruptions' of Christianity and the scepticism of 'unbelievers'. 'The world requires to be in a manner re-christianized', he told the church of Swedenborg in 1791, and he worked tirelessly to demonstrate that faith is the most rational response to the evidence of the Bible.[2]

Priestley's ministry took on greater urgency after the French Revolution,

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[1] From the 'Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley to the Year 1795, quoted in Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: In Transylvania, England, and America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), p.297. Hereafter, *History of Unitarianism.*

[2] *Letters to the members of the New Jerusalem Church* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), pp.1-2. Hereafter, *Letters to the NJC.*

understanding it as a sign of the approach of the millennium.[3] Preaching a fast sermon on 28 February 1794 at the Gravel Pit Meeting House in Hackney, Priestley's text was 'Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand! (Matt.iii.2)'. His theme, and the title of the sermon, was *The present state of Europe compared with antient* [sic.] *prophecies*, in which he explains that the 'late revolution in France appears to me, and many others, to be not improbably the accomplishment' of a number of biblical prophecies. Despite the note of caution in his use of the double negative 'not improbably', Priestley's certainty concerning the future is more forthright: 'may we not hence conclude it to be highly probable, that what has taken place in France will be done in other countries?'[4]

He understood the overthrow of the Church, State, and Monarchy in France to be part of the divine plan of Providence, enabling him to rejoice in the tumult as a stage in the renewal of the creation. Moreover, he hoped to avert the coming wrath by preaching his reading of Christianity:

> Whatever turn the course of things may take, it cannot then be to our disadvantage. What, then, should hinder our contemplating the great scene, that seems now to be opening upon us, awful as it is, with tranquillity, and even with satisfaction, from our firm persuasion, that its termination will be glorious and happy?
>
> Lastly, the more there are who indulge these enlarged and just views, who cultivate a sense of piety to God (which will always lead us to suppress resentment, and to promote goodwill towards men) the more favour, in the righteous administration of Providence, will be shewn [sic.] to the country in which they shall be found. God, we know, would have spared even Sodom, if so many as ten righteous men had been found in it. (*Present State of Europe*, p.32)

In effect taking the place of Abraham, Priestley is suggesting that the salvation of the country is more or less a question of numbers, a matter of persuading the deity to

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[3] 'Priestley had written on the Millennium before the French Revolution, but it was that event that transformed a rather casual interest in philosophy into a tense and eager anticipation of the Second Coming.' Clarke Garrett, 'Joseph Priestley, the Millennium, and the French Revolution', *JHI*, 34 (1973), 51-66 (p.53). Hereafter, *Garrett*.

[4] Joseph Priestley, *The Present State of Europe compared with Antient* [sic.] *Prophecies*' (London: J. Johnson, 1794), pp. 25-7. Hereafter, *Present State of Europe*.

show mercy by finding sufficient believers with the correct views and 'a sense of piety to God'. Priestley's role, however, was closer to that of Lot, because a week after delivering this sermon, he reluctantly left England for good. It would be left to other Unitarians to continue the cause, and not least of these was Coleridge.

For the young Coleridge, whose interest in Unitarianism is generally considered to have begun at Cambridge through William Frend, the appeal of Priestley's defences of Christianity was great. As discussed in the previous chapter, during the period 1794-5 Coleridge was looking to support his own wavering faith, and to 'Christianize' both Southey and the Pantisocracy. Priestley not only gave him the arguments in support of these aims, but had an enormous influence on the Unitarian circles in which Coleridge began to write, lecture, and preach.

The impact of Priestley's work on Coleridge's ministry was double-edged. On the one hand, Priestley was a source of arguments in support of an all encompassing theory of Christianity which could apparently be demonstrated and proved. No prior faith would be required, but a cool and unprejudiced assessment of evidence, eloquently delivered by the preacher. On the other hand, Priestley's is an impersonal Christianity, with no direct experience of God and tending towards generalities at the expense of the individual. The divine presence in the creation is limited to a generalised Providence making man an instrument of the divine purpose, and that purpose may well involve the suffering and death of thousands.

The tensions that this influence created in Coleridge's ministry are discussed in detail in the succeeding chapters. This chapter explores the themes that are central to those discussions, and is divided into three sections. The first examines in detail the importance of Priestley both to his age and more specifically to Coleridge. The second critically examines Priestley's exegesis of the Bible, and his conception of the

deity. The third explores how Priestley's religious ideas relate to his vision for social and political reform. Particular focus will fall upon Priestley's *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion* (1794), a work that is profoundly important to Coleridge's early religious thought and lecturing.[5]

i. 'Patriot, and Saint, and Sage'[6]

Priestley's reputation as a natural philosopher in the latter half of the eighteenth-century can hardly be over-stated. Hazlitt wrote that 'his chemical experiments (so curious a variety in a dissenting minister's pursuits) laid the foundation and often nearly completed the superstructure of most of the modern discoveries in that science'.[7] More recently Isaac Kramnick has described him as 'the pre-eminent scientist in the Anglo-American world in the era of the American and French Revolutions'.[8] Priestley explicitly connects the development of science with the removal of superstition, and which in turn had potentially dramatic implications for the British Constitution. The advancement of natural philosophy was unveiling a discourse not based on faith by submission to received authority, Priestley believed; it is a discourse based on observation, cool reasoning, and conclusions drawn from solid evidence. This methodology, applied to other spheres, could bring about critical reassessment by philosophical societies such as the 'Lunar Society' in Birmingham, as Kramnick has described:

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[5] Joseph Priestley, *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*, in *Rutt* xv, 193-362. Hereafter, *Discourses*.
[6] 'Religious Musings', l.371.
[7] William Hazlitt, 'The Late Dr. Priestley' in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (New York: AMS, 1967), xx, 236-39 (p.237).
[8] Isaac Kramnick, 'Eighteenth-Century Science and Radical Social Theory: The Case of Joseph Priestley's Scientific Liberalism', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986),1-30 (p.3). Hereafter *Kramnick*.

> Science, which had expelled superstition from the heavens, could expel the mysteries that lay heavy on aristocratic society. Its new and corrosive ideals were truth, efficiency, and utility.
>
> The practitioners of this science saw it as the handmaiden of a radical politics. In his *Experiments on Different Kinds of Air*, Priestley was so convinced that science undermined all 'undue and usurped authority' that he envisioned the English hierarchy with 'reason to tremble even at an air pump or an electrical machine'.[9]

Humorous and unlikely as this seems, the threat from this laboratory apparatus is emblematic of dramatic changes in the economic and hence power bases in European society, as the momentum of the Industrial Revolution grew.

Priestley represented a far more direct threat to the Church through his voluminous writing on theology however. The eminent Unitarian historian E. M. Wilbur describes Priestley as 'beyond doubt the most influential figure in the earlier history of the Unitarian movement in England, and has also been judged one of the most remarkable men of the eighteenth century.'[10] More recently Martin Priestman has suggested that 'as a Unitarian minister, he briefly helped to turn that form of anti-trinitarian Christianity into one of the most powerful intellectual forces in the country'.[11]

Priestley wrote candidly of what he perceived to be theological error in the doctrines of the Church, and earned himself the nickname 'Gunpowder Joe' for his injudicious use of an incendiary metaphor in his 1785 *Reflections on the Present State of Free Inquiry in this Country*. He described dissenters as 'laying gunpowder, grain by grain, under the old building of error and superstition, which a single spark may hereafter inflame so as to produce an instantaneous explosion'.[12] Priestley later qualified this, explaining that he was not inciting violence but vigorous argument, though the name

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[9] *Kramnick*, pp.11-2.
[10] *History of Unitarianism*, p.294. For Priestley's importance to the development of Unitarianism, see also Gordon Alexander, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (London: Green, 1895); Basil Willey, *Eighteenth Century Background: Studies in the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), pp.181-194. Hereafter *Eighteenth Century Background.*
[11] Martin Priestman, *Romantic Atheism: Poetry and freethought, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.13. Hereafter *Romantic Atheism.*
[12] *Rutt* xviii, 544.

and a reputation for political radicalism stuck.

It is a little surprising in view of the radical implications of his science and theology, that Priestley should claim in the preface to the *Present State of Europe*, that 'the whole course of my studies, from early life, shows how little *politics* of any kind have been my object'.[13] This apparently disingenuous claim is a reflection of Priestley's modular thinking. He considered that religion and politics ought to have very specific jurisdiction – simply put, politics is concerned with this life, and religion with the next – and so he thought that criticism of the Church ought not to be considered a political act.[14] When Charles James Fox made a similar claim in his speech in support of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in March 1790, Pitt replied that religious toleration would effectively 'throw open a door for the entrance of *some* individuals who might consider it a point of *conscience* to shake our Establishment to its foundations'.[15] As hostility grew towards France in the early 1790s, it became unrealistic to think that public criticism of the Church could be considered by the government to be apolitical.[16]

Whether Priestley considered his theology political or not, the 'Church and King Riots' of July 1791 left him in no doubt that in the popular mind he was an unpatriotic Francophile.[17] It is an event that symbolises the changing attitude towards religious dissent, as Michael Watts has observed:

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[13] *Present State of Europe*, ix.
[14] Priestley's divisions of the responsibilities of the Church and State are discussed in detail below.
[15] 'Speech of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the Commons on Tuesday, the 2nd March 1790', quoted in *Unitarian Radicalism*, p.5.
[16] See Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: the Radical Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.92 (hereafter *Radical Years*): 'By 1793 [...] religious dissent and political radicalism had become synonymous, and Unitarianism was readily confounded with violent revolutionary conspiracy'.
[17] For Priestley's account of the riots, see the preface to *Present State of Europe*; William Cobbett interpreted the destruction as deserved, and sympathised rather with the rioters. See his 'Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley', in Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) pp.136-41. For a non-partisan analysis, see R.B. Rose, 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', *Past and Present*, 18 (1960), 66-88.

> The growing hostility to Dissent engendered by the French Revolution and the campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts was not confined to the clergy, gentry, and MPs. Priestley was followed round the streets of Birmingham by boys chanting 'Damn Priestley, damn him for ever', and in the riots which began on the evening of 14 July 1791 Dissenting meeting-houses were the chief target of the Birmingham mob. Provoked by the holding of a dinner to celebrate the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, and encouraged by local magistrates, the mob set fire to, and gutted, the New Meeting House where Priestley ministered, went on to the Old Meeting House, which was similarly set ablaze, and then proceeded to Priestley's home at Fair Hill. Priestley escaped to the home of his son-in-law near Dudley while the mob, proclaiming its loyalty to 'Church and King', sacked his house, destroyed his books and papers, and wrecked his laboratory and apparatus. For three days the rioters burned and looted the homes of other leading Dissenters in Birmingham.[18]

Watts further remarks that 'George III probably expressed the opinion of most members of the ruling class when he commented that while he did not approve of the manner in which the mob had wreaked its vengeance on Priestley, he was well "pleased that Priestley is the sufferer for the doctrines he and his party have instilled"'.[19]

Although Priestley was compensated for his losses, and seventeen of the rioters were tried (and three hanged),[20] the riots signalled the beginning of a period of harassment that ended only with his emigration. A little over a month before leaving for America, he wrote:

> From the year 1791, the Dissenters have been more exposed to insult and outrage than ever. [...] Many times, by the encouragement of persons from whom better things might have been expected, I have been burned in effigy along with Mr. Paine; and numberless insulting and threatening letters have been sent to me from all parts of the kingdom. (*Present State of Europe*, pp.vii & xiv)

As will be seen, Priestley was concerned to distinguish himself from Paine's religious views, but in the public eye they were both unpatriotic infidels. Indeed towards the

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[18] Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp.486-7. Hereafter *The Dissenters*.
[19] *Ibid.* p.487.
[20] 'The Priestley Riots of 1791', p.82.

end of 1792, an effigy of Paine was burned before the door of the house of Coleridge's Unitarian friend Joshua Toulmin (1740-1815), nearly setting it alight. This event both exemplifies how widespread anti-dissenting feeling had become, and the way in French sympathisers were lumped together, irrespective of their religious views.[21]

Emigration effectively ended Priestley's political activities, as the Atlantic made the transfer of news and comment too slow to have effective influence. A somewhat sad letter written four years later reflects his isolation, as he laments the absence of anyone to discuss his millenarian views with: 'being alone, having no person whatever to confer with on any subject of this kind, my solitary speculations may lead me astray, farther than I can be aware of myself'.[22]

By the time Priestley left England at the age of sixty-one, however, he had published an extraordinarily vast and diverse range of work. He has been described as a 'physicist, chemist, historian, educationalist, grammarian, political theorist, philosopher and theologian'.[23] But despite this versatility Priestley considered 'the office of a Christian minister the most honourable of any upon earth'.[24] Though he held a broad conception of ministry, and did not see this 'office' as being in opposition to his other pursuits. He wrote in his *Memoirs*, 'I can truly say that the greatest satisfaction I receive from the success of my philosophical pursuits arises from the weight it may give to my attempts to defend Christianity.'[25] The impressive range of

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[21] Toulmin wrote in a letter that the spirit of the Riots has 'every where shown itself. At Taunton it discovered itself, and I was the marked object of its *spleen*, tho' not of its violence; for it did not there proceed to violence: tho' things looked that way.' Quoted in David L. Wiles, 'Joshua Toulmin (1740-1815) of Taunton: Baptist minister, historian and religious radical', *Baptist Quarterly*, 39 (2002), 224-42 (p.235).

[22] *Rutt*, i, 404.

[23] Jonathan Wordsworth in the preface to the Woodstock *Present State of Europe*.

[24] *History of Unitarianism*, p.297.

[25] Quoted in *Eighteenth Century Background*, p.172. As I will discuss in chapter five, Coleridge appealed to the example of Priestley when explaining to Estlin why he had turned down the

subjects on which Priestley engaged led, perhaps inevitably, to breadth rather than depth, as Willey has observed:

> Priestley's incessant transitions between religion and philosophy, and his diffuse productivity as a writer, suggest, what is indeed the fact, that his mind was comprehensive rather than profound. He does not qualify for the first rank in any one field, except perhaps in 'pneumatic chemistry', and even here his results were correctly interpreted not by himself but by Lavoisier. (*Eighteenth Century Background*, p.170)

This versatility, however, enabled Priestley to write confidently in so many fields all in the name of Christianity, and for the young Coleridge, eager to learn and preach, and to assimilate his broadening interests into unifying relationships, Priestley was a formidable role model.

Willey suggests that Coleridge's sonnet to Priestley published in December 1794, illustrates 'the completeness with which Priestley then personified his religious, political, and intellectual ideals'.[26] Coleridge's interest in Priestley, however, is reflected in his writing and correspondence only after meeting Southey six months earlier.[27] Indeed as Priestley set sail for America on 7th April 1794, Coleridge was still awaiting discharge from the army, and was preoccupied with ordering his own life rather than showing concern for the Unitarian cause.[28] Over the following two years, however, Coleridge admired and emulated Priestley, and moved amongst people who knew and venerated him.

For Coleridge, a significant part of Priestley's appeal was due to their shared admiration of Hartley. But whereas Hartley had died in 1757, fifteen years before Coleridge was born, Priestley was a figure of international repute in politics, religion,

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Shrewsbury ministry in 1798: 'I regard every experiment that Priestley made in chemistry, as giving *wings* to his more sublime theological works' (*CL* i, 372).

[26] *Eighteenth Century Background*, p.194.

[27] The first mention of Priestley in Coleridge's writing is a letter written to Henry Martin, 22 July 1794 (*CL* i, 91), though the citation has few features of interest.

[28] Coleridge was discharged from the army on 10th April: see chapter one.

and natural philosophy, just as Coleridge was moving into his first productive years. The importance of Hartley to both men was his philosophical evidence for the significance of religious ideas, as Richard Haven has described:

> The purpose of his psychological theories was to provide scientific 'proof' of the validity of religious and ethical ideas. [...] By presenting religious and moral ideas as determined in the same manner and with the same necessity as ideas of the physical world, Hartley made it possible to argue that such ideas are as valid as our ideas of the trees and rocks which we 'see,' and that religious and moral laws have an objective existence in 'reality' as well as a subjective existence in the mind.[29]

Coleridge's admiration for Hartley is well known, referring to him as 'the great master of *Christian* philosophy', and of course, naming his first child after him.[30] Priestley was similarly committed, writing in his *Memoirs*: 'I do not know whether the consideration of Dr Hartley's theory, contributes more to enlighten the mind, or improve the heart; it affects both in so super-eminent a degree'.[31] He also paid homage by publishing an abridged version of the *Observations on Man* in 1775, entitled *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind on the Principle of the Association of Ideas*.

In this work Priestley argued, however, that Hartley did not go far enough because he retained the doctrine of the soul. Hartley's system of vibrations gave a material explanation for the association of ideas, and in the preface to *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind*, he conjectured that 'the property of perception, as well as the other powers that are termed mental, is the result (whether necessary or not) of such an organical structure as that of the brain'.[32] The impact of this suggestion, Priestley

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[29] Richard Haven, 'Coleridge, Hartley, and the Mystics', *JHI*, 20 (1959), 477-94 (p.427). See also *Garrett*, pp.54-6.
[30] To Thomas Poole 24 Sept 1796: *CL* i, 236.
[31] Jack Lindsay, ed., *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1970), p.76. Hereafter *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*.
[32] Quoted in the preface to *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (*Rutt*, iii, 200). Hereafter *Matter and Spirit*.

later wrote, was a widespread 'cry against me as an *unbeliever*, and a *favourer of atheism*'.[33] Characteristically Priestley's response was combative, publishing his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* two years later, which is an extended attack on the doctrine of the soul, and a series of arguments through which 'the *reproach of matter* is wiped off'.[34] Indeed he went on to argue that 'by the help of the system of materialism, also, the Christian removes the very foundation of many doctrines, which have exceedingly debased and corrupted Christianity'.[35]

Peter Mann refers to a letter written to Southey on 11 December 1794, in which Coleridge's commitment to both Hartley and Priestley's reading of him, is implicit:

> To Southey he affirmed his attachment not only to Hartley, but implicitly to Priestley and his 'materialism' as it was described in *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777):
>
> I am a compleat [sic] Necessitarian – and understand the subject as well almost as Hartley himself – but I go farther than Hartley and believe the corporeality of thought – namely, that it is motion. (*CL* i 137).

And although Coleridge would soon have problems with Priestley's materialism, at this early stage he appealed not only a promoter of Hartley, but as a figure who applied Hartleian ideas in the defence of Christianity against both contemporary unbelievers, and against the 'corrupted' Church.

As a staunch supporter of the French Revolution and at the same time a Christian apologist, Priestley represented a considerable asset in Coleridge's attempts to 'Christianize' Southey and the Pantisocracy. Indeed as I have discussed in the previous chapter, the example of Priestley settling in Philadelphia is likely to have had a formative influence on the Pantisocracy. And although Dyer's suggestion that

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[33] *Ibid*, 200.
[34] *Ibid*, 270.
[35] *Ibid*, 256.

Priestley would join them in the System was far-fetched, Coleridge connected Priestley to the System in his poetry.[36] In September 1794 Coleridge wrote of himself, 'O'er the Ocean swell | Sublime of Hope I seek the cottag'd Dell'.[37] And in December of the same year Coleridge and Charles Lamb (also a Unitarian) shared their enthusiasm for Priestley in 'The Salutation and Cat' in London, resulting in Coleridge's sonnet to Priestley.[38] Unlike Coleridge, his emigration was not looked for: 'Riot rude | Have driven our Priestley o'er the ocean swell'.[39]

The sonnet to Priestley has few features of interest, but two weeks after publication in the *Morning Chronicle*, Coleridge began writing his most ambitious early poem, 'Religious Musings', which contains similarly extravagant praise for Priestley:

> Lo! Priestley there, patriot, and saint, and sage,
> Him, full of years, from his loved native land
> Statesmen blood-stained and priests idolatrous
> By dark lies maddening the blind multitude
> Drove with vain hate. Calm, pitying he retired,
> And mused expectant on these promised years. (ll.371-6)

It will be clear from the above discussion that to describe Priestley as a patriot is to counter the widespread public view of him. For both Coleridge and Priestley, nothing could be more patriotic than to reform the nation for the betterment of its people, even if this entailed the promotion of anti-establishment ideas. And in both poems, Coleridge condemns the Riots.

Another common theme in the poems is the description of Priestley as 'calm'.[40] Priestley's calmness is a characteristic that runs throughout his writing, and rests upon

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[36] *CL* i 98. The differences between Priestley's and Coleridge's attitudes to property makes the idea of Priestley joining the system ludicrous. Priestley saw the protection of private property to be one of the few truly useful functions of government.
[37] 'Pantisocracy', ll.4-5, *Keach*, p.57.
[38] Cf. *Interviews and Recollections*, p.28.
[39] Priestley, ll.1-2, *Keach*, p.70.
[40] 'Calm in his halls of brightness he shall dwell', l.5, *Keach*, p.70.

a number of related (at least in Priestley's mind) beliefs: his necessitarianism; what Thomas McFarland refers to as 'Baconian progressivism'; and as Coleridge presents it in the above extract, a confidence in the future as revealed in the Bible ('these promised years').[41] His calmness is a quality celebrated also by Hazlitt who wrote,

> On great and trying occasions he was calm and resigned, having been schooled by the lessons of religion and philosophy, or, perhaps, from being, as it were, taken by surprise, and never having been accustomed to the indulgence of strong passions or violent emotions. ('The Late Dr Priestley', p.236).

Here Hazlitt relates the calmness to 'religion and philosophy' and to his character, but as I will argue in the next chapter, Coleridge's emerging differences in each of these would create problems in his work.

In May 1796, as Lamb read Coleridge's praise of Priestley in the poem, he playfully boasted,

> Coleridge, in reading your Rs Musings I felt a transcient superiority over you: I *have* seen Priestley. I love to see his name repeated in your writings. I love and honour him almost profanely.[42] (*LL* i. 11)

This idolization is all the more remarkable given that as a Unitarian, Lamb rejected worship of Jesus, let alone Priestley. Although Coleridge did not meet the 'author of modern Unitarianism',[43] as he later referred to him, such was Priestley's influence on Unitarianism that he indirectly had a profound impact through an extensive network of mutual acquaintances and friendships.

Priestley was a tutor of language and belles-lettres at the distinguished Warrington Academy, between ceasing to be minister in Nantwich in 1761, and taking to the

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[41] Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p.170.
[42] This comment may well have been prompted by Coleridge's lines in 'Religious Musings': 'Priestley [...] whom that my fleshly eye hath never seen | A childish pang of impotent regret | Hath thrill'd my heart' (ll.396-8, *1796*).
[43] *Table Talk*, p.499.

pulpit once again in Leeds in 1767. One historian has written that 'Priestley became the most famous of all the tutors and did more to give the Academy its unique status than anybody else'.[44] Famously whilst at Warrington he befriended the Aikin family, and claimed even to have been the inspiration for Anna Barbauld to start writing poetry.[45]

In 1764, the key Unitarian influence on Coleridge during his Bristol years and patron of his 1795 lectures, John Prior Estlin, was taught divinity by Dr. John Aikin (1713-80), and by Priestley in his expanded version of 'Belles-Lettres'.[46] Barbauld wrote a 'Memoir of the Late J.P. Estlin',[47] in which she relates that in response to Estlin's *Evidences of Revealed Religion* (1796), Priestley had declared himself 'honoured by having had a share in the Author's education'.[48]

Whilst ministering at Mill Hill in Leeds (1767-72), Priestley formed a friendship with Theophilus Lindsey, which became one of the most significant friendships in the history of Unitarianism. Lindsey was an Anglican clergyman at the time but felt increasingly uneasy with the doctrines of the Church, and by 1774 he had inaugurated the first Unitarian chapel in Essex Street, London.[49] This would become a centre for Unitarianism, and through which Priestley would meet and influence a great many important Unitarians. In terms of Coleridge's Unitarianism, perhaps the most

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[44] P. O'Brien, *Warrington Academy 1757-86: Its Predecessors and Successors* (Wigan: Owl, 1989), p.56. Hereafter, *Warrington Academy*.

[45] 'Mrs. Barbauld has told me that it was the perusal of some verses of mine, that first induced her to write any thing in verse [...] Several of her first poems were written when she was in my house, on occasions that occurred while she was there', *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, p.89. For the Aikin family and Warrington Academy, see Daniel E. White, 'The "Joineriana": Anna Barbauld, the Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32 (1999), 511-33.

[46] *Warrington Academy*, p.58: 'An outstanding feature of Priestley's career at Warrington Academy was that he did not consider himself in any way limited by his rather narrow brief. His active and fertile mind moved in many directions.' Alexander Gordon makes a similar point: 'At Warrington . . . they set him to teach rhetoric; but he struck out a line of his own, converting a tutorship in the *belles lettres* into a chair of constitutional history.' quoted in *Warrington Academy*, p.58.

[47] Appended to John Prior Estlin, *Familiar Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 2vols (London: Longman, 1818).

[48] *Ibid*, xviii. As I will discuss in chapter three, Estlin's *Evidences* owed a great deal to Priestley's *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion*.

[49] Lindsey and the Essex St. Chapel are discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

significant friendship that Priestley started through Lindsey and the chapel was with William Frend. Priestley and Frend were working together on a translation of the Bible together, believing the Authorized Version to be both the product and subsequently cause of theological error.[50] Their unfinished translation was burned in the 'Church and King Riots'.[51]

Prior to the Riots, Priestley's post at the 'New Meeting' in Birmingham was a situation in which he revelled. A city at the heart of the country's industrialization, Priestley began to spend time with the 'Lunar Society', where amongst others 'he enjoyed the friendship and active help of the scientifically minded potter, Josiah Wedgwood, who supplied him with apparatus tailor-made for his purposes'.[52] Though it is ironic that the Unitarian brothers Tom and Josiah Wedgwood would later fund Coleridge, enabling him to avoid taking up the Unitarian ministry at Shrewsbury in January 1798.

Two other Unitarians are worthy of mention who connect Priestley and Coleridge: David Jardine (1766-1797), and Joshua Toulmin. Jardine preached from the Trim Street Chapel in Bath, and it was from his pulpit that Coleridge preached his first sermon. Jardine's early death prompted Estlin to collect his sermons into two volumes, appending a biographical preface:[53]

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[50] It was a common complaint among Unitarians that the Authorized Version of the bible is misleading. See for example Gilbert Wakefield, *A New Translation of those Parts only of the New Testament, which are wrongly translated in our common Version* (London: J. Johnson, 1789); Theophilus Lindsey, *A List of the False Readings of the Scriptures* (London: J. Johnson, 1790). Similarly, when discussing the prophecies of Isaiah 52-3 in the third lecture, Coleridge writes: 'The passage is well known yet as it is in some parts falsely rendered in our Translation, I shall repeat it as collected from later and more accurate Versions' (LPR, 153).

[51] Cf. Frida Knight, *University Rebel: The Life of William Frend 1757-1841* (London: Gollancz, 1971), pp.97-102.

[52] John A. Passmore, *Priestley's Writings: on Philosophy, Science, and Politics* (New York: Collier, 1965), p.31 (hereafter *Priestley's Writings*). See Ian Wylie, 'Coleridge and the Lunaticks', in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, eds. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[53] David Jardine, *Sermons by the Late Rev. David Jardine of Bath: Published from the Original Manuscripts by the Rev. John Prior Estlin* (Bristol: Biggs, 1798). Jardine and his preaching are discussed in more detail in chapter four.

> He applied himself to the study of theology [...] and the result of his investigation of the doctrines of Christianity, was a total change of his bias towards the system of Dr. Priestley. [...] In December 1790, he received an invitation from the society of the new meeting, as it was then called, in Birmingham, to be co-pastor with Doctor Priestley.' (*Jardine Sermons*, pp.ii-iii).

Jardine turned down the invitation because of family health issues, and in doing so avoided the Riots that were to occur six months later. Joshua Toulmin, at whose chapel in Taunton Coleridge also preached, had corresponded with Priestley from at least 1771, and eventually in 1804 become one of two ministers at Priestley's former congregation at the New Meeting. At his school in Taunton he also taught John Towill Rutt (1760-1829), who would go on to edit the standard twenty-five volume edition of Priestley's works.[54]

It is clear, therefore, that Priestley's influence on Coleridge went well beyond an intellectual one, and in the succeeding chapters I will explore the importance of this Priestleian environment to Coleridge's work. Priestley's ideas were, of course, also vitally important, and in particular the way in which he applied his empirical methodology to the Bible and to theology. The remainder of this chapter is concerned with these issues, and the way in which his beliefs led to radical proposals for the reform of society.

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ii. 'Enlightened Christians'[55]

Priestley's reading of the French Revolution reveals a great deal about his

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[54] Details of Toulmin taken from Wiles (cited above), pp.224 & 229-31.
[55] *Discourses*, p.194.

understanding of Christianity. Initially, and before the French Church was abolished, Priestley celebrated the Revolution as a triumph for both civil and religious liberty. In his *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1791), Priestley considers 'the Prospect of the General Enlargement of Liberty, Civil and Religious, Opened by the Revolution in France'. His optimism for what the Revolution augured for France and her neighbours is extraordinary, finding the changes to be the start of a new era for mankind. Like the 'noble example of America', events in France *preached* the doctrine of liberty in a universally intelligible language:[56]

> Such events as these teach the doctrine of liberty, civil and religious, with infinitely greater clearness and force than a thousand treatises on the subject. They speak a language intelligible to all the world, and preach a doctrine congenial to every human heart.
>
> These great events, in many respects unparalleled in all history, make a totally new, a most wonderful and important, era in the history of mankind. It is, to adopt your own rhetorical style, a change from darkness to light, from superstition to sound knowledge and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom. It is a liberating of all the powers of man from that variety of fetters by which they have hitherto been held. So that, in comparison with what has been, now only can we expect to see what men really are, and what they can do. (*Priestley's Writings*, p.251).

It is interesting to note Priestley's apologetic use of rhetoric in this passage – 'to adopt your own rhetorical style' – indicating his preference for 'plain meaning' (discussed below). Although the Revolution is celebrated in religious terms to a certain extent – it preaches a doctrine to every human heart – the emphasis is on liberty and knowledge. It is not so much a revelation of God as the falling away of old corruptions, and what is revealed is what *man* is and can do.

In the succeeding three years however, the French Church was dissolved, its lands and wealth seized, a process of de-christianization was undertaken (including the revised calendar and the re-naming of streets bearing the names of religious figures),

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[56] *Priestley's Writings*, p.252.

and Robespierre initiated the cult of the Supreme Being. These actions supported the reactionary presentation of the Revolution as an uprising of infidelity, and even Priestley acknowledged that these events demanded attention. Indeed his last works written before emigration in 1794 were a direct response to these changes. In the preface to the *Discourses*, he wrote,

> The late revolution in France, attended with the complete overthrow of the civil establishment of Christianity, and the avowed rejection of all revealed religion, by many persons of the first character in that country, and by great numbers also in this, calls the attention of persons of reflection in a very forcible manner to the subject. (*Discourses*, p.195)

Priestley's strategy in the *Discourses* is to make a clear distinction between revealed religion, and the institutionalised representation of it in national churches. Moreover, he attempts to show that despite the apparent infidelity of the French in rejecting their Church, their actions were not only justified but prophesied.

The overthrow of state Christianity in France was no surprise to Priestley. Personal experience of travelling in France in 1774 had brought him face to face with the prevalence of infidelity, as he recorded in his *Memoirs*:

> All the philosophical persons to whom I was introduced at Paris [were] unbelievers in Christianity, and even professed atheists. As I chose on all occasions to appear as a Christian, I was told by some of them that I was the only person they had ever met with, of whose understanding they had any opinion, who professed to believe Christianity. But on interrogating them on the subject, I soon found that they had given no proper attention to it, and did not really know what Christianity was. (quoted in *Eighteenth Century Background*, pp.171-2).

He repeated the charge in the *Present State of Europe*, adding that the French had effectively been unbelievers for at least fifty years, but only the unrestrained atmosphere of the Revolution had enabled those views to emerge. He further suggests that if a comparable atmosphere were to preside in England, the result would be

similar.

Priestley considered Unitarianism, which he saw as the only rational interpretation of the Bible, to be so different from the state Christianity rejected by 'unbelievers', that their arguments could have no relevance to his position. Indeed their rejection made them allies in Priestley's mission to purify Christianity:[57]

> The wretched forms under which Christianity has long been generally exhibited, and its degrading alliance with, or rather its subjection to, a power wholly heterogeneous to it, and which has employed it for the most unworthy purposes, has made it appear contemptible and odious in the eyes of all sensible men, who are now every where casting off the very profession, and every badge, of it. Enlightened Christians must, themselves, in some measure, join with unbelievers, in exposing whatever will not bear examination in or about religion. But when it shall, by this means, be divested of all its foreign incumbrances [sic], it will be found to be something on which neither their arguments nor their ridicule will have any effect. (*Discourses*, p.194)

The secular French Constitution, therefore, was not anti-religious but enlightened in its recognition of the different functions of the State and the Church. 'Enlightened Christians' and unbelievers are 'sensible men', Priestley suggests. This view could not be further from that held by Burke, as Robert Hole has described:

> In October 1793 Burke denounced the French Revolutionaries as atheists who had forced the people to abjure their faith in God and systematically turned them into savages. They excluded religion, the life-blood of the moral and political world, from their concept of the state.[58]

What they had excluded, according to Priestley, was a superstitious edifice based on theological corruption. Moreover their actions are almost sanctified by scripture, he suggests, presenting their infidelity as a sign of Christ's Second Coming:

> It is no small satisfaction to Christians, that even the present prevalence of infidelity, as

[57] As will be seen in the next chapter, Priestley's sympathetic attitude towards unbelievers was not shared by Coleridge.
[58] Robert Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order in England: 1760-1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p.152. Hereafter *Pulpits and Politics*.

> well as the universal spread, and final establishment of Christianity, were foretold by Christ. And as he spake of this infidelity as one of the signs of his approaching coming, we may be looking forward with confidence and joy to that glorious event; after which, the belief of Christianity, together with the reign of virtue and of peace, will be universal. This will be that *kingdom of God*, or *of heaven*, which is the consummation to which we should be devoutly looking, and which, by our Saviour's direction, is the subject of our daily prayers, when *nation shall no more lift up sword against nation, and when they shall learn war no more.* (*Discourses*, p.196)

Priestley's hopes for the universal belief in Christianity necessarily involve the religious and the non-religious, but would also unite all religions, as one critic has pointed out:

> Priestley looks forward to a time when all Christians will profess 'the great article of the *unity of God*', and expects that Christianity, being 'freed from other corruptions and embarrassments' will then be accepted by 'Jews and Mahometans, and become the religion of the whole world'. (*Unitarian Radicalism*, p.15).

This aspiration accounts for the range of religious groups that Priestley addressed in his writing. It is undoubtedly a testament to Priestley's broad-mindedness that he could engage with such a range of religious opinion, and his intermittently published *Theological Repository* was open to any, 'from the Roman Catholic to the Deist'.[59] Even his objections to the Church of England were restricted to its state protection, and although he profoundly disagreed with its theology, it was the connection to the State that he thought should be abolished.

Accommodating this diversity, however, was in part a product of Priestley's arrogance. He informed the Swedenborgians, for example, that 'with a change of your phraseology, and very little in your ideas, you are as proper unitarians, as we who are usually called *Socinians*.'[60] Priestley understood non-Unitarian positions simply as the result of faulty reasoning, and this applied equally to atheists and theists alike. As one critic has observed of Priestley, 'with him it was a primary conviction

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[59] Cf *Rutt*, iv, 253.
[60] *Letters to the NJC*, p.30.

that to test Christianity by reason could only free it from alloy; its purity regained, its supremacy was assured'.[61]

The centre-piece of Priestley's attack would be an analysis of the historical foundations of the Bible:

> It now more than ever behoves all the friends of religion to shew [sic] that they are not chargeable with a blind, *implicit faith*, believing what their fathers, mothers, or nurses, believed before them, merely because they believed it; but that their faith is the offspring of reason: that Christianity is no *cunningly devised fable*, but that the evidence of the facts on which it is built, is the same with that of any other facts of ancient date; so that we must abandon all faith in history, and all human testimony, before we can disbelieve them. (*Discourses*, p.196)

Priestley's allusion to the second epistle of Peter is apposite. The epistle is a call to be 'partakers of the divine nature', so that 'an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (1.4 & 11). To minister such an entrance is clearly Priestley's intention, as his allusion to the destruction of Sodom in the quote with which this chapter began, makes clear. The first chapter of Peter's epistle challenges its auditors to accept the truth of the gospel narratives as having the authority of eyewitness accounts:

> For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (1.16)

Priestley seized on the idea of the gospels as eyewitness accounts with a thoroughgoing literalism. By demonstrating the historical accuracy of the gospels, Priestley argued that faith becomes no more problematic than accepting any other historical 'truth':

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[61] *Heads of English Unitarian History*, p.108.

> There are no kinds of truth of which we have a more firm persuasion than of those of the historical kind; as for example, that such a person as *Julius Caesar* once lived at *Rome*, and that there exists at present such a city as *Constantinople.* (*Discourses*, p.327)

Priestley's confidence in historical evidence emerged from a particularly mechanical understanding of the 'progress' (and for Priestley it very much is progress) of history. He believed there to be 'a necessary connection between all things past, present, and to come':[62]

> According to the established laws of nature no event could have been otherwise than it has been, is, or is to be, and therefore all things past, present, and to come are precisely what the Author of nature really intended them to be, and has made provision for.[63]

This rigid chain of cause and effect gave Priestley confidence that by comparing the biblical accounts with subsequent events, he could assess the reliability of the former: all effects must have a sufficient cause. Given 'the actual existence of Christianity, and the state of it in the age immediately following that of Christ and the apostles', Priestley argues in the *Discourses*, the Bible must be an accurate 'record'.[64] He later argues that 'Christianity supplies the only probable method of accounting for past and present *appearances*, and therefore what a true *philosopher*, whose object it is to enquire into the *causes of things*, will adopt, in preference to any other'.[65]

Priestley's commitment to historical analysis is also based on his conviction that the Bible is not complicated, but the passage of time has made it difficult to pin down the meaning:

> To those who lived in the times in which these books were published, they were, no doubt, very intelligible; the language in which they are written, and the customs to

[62] *Philosophical Necessity*, p.460.
[63] *Ibid.* p.461.
[64] *Discourses*, p.195. Priestley often referred to the scriptures as 'records'; see for example his Index to the Bible [...] Designed to facilitate the Study of these Invaluable Records' (*Rutt*, xxv, 196-200).
[65] *Discourses*, p.341.

> which they allude, being perfectly known to them. But what was easy to them, a long course of time has rendered extremely difficult to us, who use a very different language, and whose manners and customs are so exceedingly unlike those of the Jews.[66]

Priestley's principal attention was to the belief of the first Christians who, he believed, had the clearest understanding of the doctrines implicit in Christ's ministry.[67] He therefore expended extraordinary amounts of energy in order to establish their beliefs. In 1786 he published the *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ*, which has been described as 'a work of massive scholarship, resting its contentions on 1,500 references to ancient authorities, with a thousand passages translated for all to read and judge for themselves'.[68] This work was published as a final sally in the long-running debate on the first Christians, between Priestley and Samuel Horsley (1733-1806), and set off by Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782). In the latter work Priestley had argued that the meaning of the Bible had not been obscured simply by the passing of time, but by the active manipulation of its doctrines by the Church in alliance with State powers.

Priestley's attempts to locate fixed meanings in the Bible made him sceptical of anything but, what he considered to be, the 'literal sense'. In his letters to the Swedenborgian Church, Priestley advised that interpretation should consist of finding the 'conformity to the natural reason of things and the plain sense of scripture'.[69] He suggests that they should reject, or least subordinate, their prophet's 'spiritual' reading of the scriptures for the 'literal sense':

> Whatever spiritual sense you put upon the scriptures, you must at least be consistent

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[66] *A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture* (1770), *Rutt*, ii, 430.
[67] 'It will be an unanswerable argument *a priori* against any particular doctrine being contained in the Scriptures, that it was never understood to be so by those persons for whose immediate use the Scriptures were written, and who must have been much better qualified to understand them, in that respect at least, than we can pretend to be at the present day.' (*Rutt*, vi, 7)
[68] *History of Unitarianism*, p.305.
[69] *Letters to the NJC*, p.17.

> with the literal sense of them. Indeed, if we are not to depend on the literal sense of scripture, we cannot depend upon the truth of historical facts recorded in them. For then Moses may mean something else than a man, the passage of the Israelites through the red sea may be nothing but an emblem of something in the mind, and the whole history of Christ, and the apostles may be a mere parable.[70]

It is a striking rejection of the value of parables given how much Jesus favoured them. The fear for Priestley is that the universal truth of history and philosophy could be totally ignored as readers interpreted the Bible as they saw fit. And so whilst Priestley attempted to rebuke Church authority by promoting free inquiry, he insisted on a new rational authority that ought to bring about uniformity. Even the literal sense could lead to diversity he feared, however:

> Different persons interpret even the literal sense differently. What, then, will be the case if, besides this literal sense, there be another concealed one, with respect to which every person will, of course, think himself at liberty to form his own conjectures?
> There is nothing that a man may not fancy that he finds in the sacred writings, or any others, when he is not confined by the plain and usual acceptation of the words before him.[71]

Priestley does not question the universality of concepts like 'the natural reason of things' and the 'plain and usual acceptation of the words', in his attempts to anchor interpretation. Moreover his 'rationalism' is very much of his time, and Priestley appears to assume that his enlightenment values may be found in the Bible. In the preface to his *Discourses*, for example, Priestley quotes from 1 Peter, in support of his call to defend Christianity as rational:

> No friend of religion, I trust, will ever decline the defence of his principles, but, as the apostle *Peter* (1 Ep. iii. 15) exhorts, be *always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him.* And in the present state of things it is of particular importance that young persons be carefully instructed in the grounds and principles of their religion, that they may be qualified both to give a good account of them, for themselves, and be able to

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[70] *Ibid.*, p.42.
[71] *Ibid.*, pp.56-7.

instruct others.[72]

Ignoring other parts of the epistle, Priestley selects his text in order to press home the importance of 'reason' in faith. Indeed, his paraphrase of the text is revealing, which originally reads:

> But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear. (1 Peter 3.15)

Priestley's paraphrase – 'be *always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him*' – focuses the verse on 'reason' in the rational sense of the word, and does not reflect the call simply to respond to questions of faith ('give an answer'). In the context of the *Discourses*, it is clear that Priestley reads this as a call to accumulate evidence based on historical and philosophical analysis of the progress of Christianity.

Despite the scholarly nature of Priestley's approach, his writing is never difficult to read. Hazlitt drew attention to this: 'notwithstanding the intricacy and novelty of many of his speculations, it may be safely asserted that there is not an obscure sentence in all he wrote. *Those who run may read.* [...] He was one of the very few who could make abstruse questions popular'.[73] Truth is invariably plain and simple for Priestley, and should accordingly be expressed plainly and with simplicity. This accounts for the above mentioned apology for using rhetoric in his letter to Burke, and also for his omission of 'meekness and fear' in his paraphrase of Peter: simple truth ought to be expressed boldly to countermand the oppressive theology of the Church. By contrast with the complexities of the tradition underpinning Anglican theology,

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[72] *Discourses*, pp.194-5. The choice of text is interesting. As Robert Hole has pointed out, 1 Peter was one of two key texts alluded to by Anglicans in support of the alliance between Church and State. Priestley's use of the text may well have been intended to substitute the authority of the Church by the authority of 'reason'. Cf. *Pulpits and Politics*, esp. ch.1.

[73] 'The Late Dr. Priestley', p.237.

Unitarianism required little to be comprehended, he argued:

> This religion is equally simple, rational, and effectual, with respect to all the real uses of religion, which is to teach men virtue, and to train them up for a state of future glory and happiness.
>
> This system is easily comprehended and explained. There is nothing intricate or mysterious in it, and it requires no implicit faith in any man. (*Letters to the NJC*, pp.61-2)

Priestley does not, however, acknowledge or even seem to recognise that his procedures in part account for the simplicity he found in his religion. Priestley's rational method always worked towards establishing pithy principles that could serve as instruction. Ambiguity, complexity, and mystery were simply obstructions that needed to be clarified by rational investigation. At the same time Priestley was, what Coleridge would call, esemplastic in his approach to the Bible. He attempted to encompass a huge range of texts in his theology, but simultaneously sought to organise this range into as few doctrines as possible. In consequence his writing on the Bible is an inconsistent mixture of diligent attention to particulars, and generalisations that gloss over detail, in his attempts to discern the 'general tenor' of a given text:

> When we inquire into the doctrine of any book, or set of books, concerning any subject, and particular passages are alleged in favour of different opinions, we should chiefly consider what is the general tenor of the whole work with respect to it.[74]

Priestley's discussion of his rejection of the divinity of Christ in *An History of the Early Opinions of Jesus Christ* (1786), illustrates the 'general tenor' method. One argument he raises is that 'our Saviour himself always prayed to his Father. And with as much humility and resignation as the most dependent being in the universe could possibly do.'[75] Following Christ, Priestley argued, the apostles too prayed to God

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[74] *Rutt*, vi, p.13.
[75] *Ibid.*, p.28.

only, but with one exception: St Stephen.[76] Priestley deals with this by arguing that it was an exception, and as such, should be disregarded under the rule that the general tenor of scripture should prevail. Adding to this Priestley argued that history shows that 'the practice of praying to the Father only, was long universal in the Christian Church: the short addresses to Christ, as those in the Litany, Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, being comparatively of late date.'[77]

A similar process of simplification characterises the central theme of his *Discourses*: the miracles. The remainder of this section explores Priestley's treatment of the miracles, as it helps to illustrate both his use of the Bible, and his conception of the deity.

Far from avoiding the miracles as a problematic challenge to his idea of a uniform and regular universe, in the *Discourses* Priestley chose 'to illustrate the evidence arising from the *miracles* that have been wrought in favour of the divine mission of Moses and of Christ'.[78] For a leading scientist who understood the world to be a mechanism operating according to fixed natural laws, it was essential that he could demonstrate the miracles to be at least compatible with this outlook.[79] But by seeking to use the miracles as positive proof of revealed religion, Priestley was repeating a strategy adopted by orthodox Christians in the earlier part of the century, and which (in reaction) gave rise to deism.[80] Robert Hole has observed, however, that

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[76] Cf. Acts 7.59.
[77] *Ibid.*, p.29.
[78] *Discourses*, p.195.
[79] Kramnick notes the prevalence of 'mechanistic imagery' in the writing of Priestley and his fellow 'Lunaticks', to discuss a vast range of subjects including republicanism, psychology, factory discipline, and personal health. Cf. *Kramnick*, pp28-9.
[80] See Burns, R.M., *The Great Debate on Miracles: From Glanvill to David Hume* (London: Associated University Press, 1981) p.70: 'The attack on miracles was not so much a spontaneous expression of modern critical consciousness as a response to the increased emphasis placed by the orthodox on miracles as indispensable evidence for revelation. The major concern of the Deists throughout the controversy was to nullify this evidentialist use of miracles stories, rather than to demonstrate the unreasonableness of belief in miracles per se'. See also Peter Gay, *Deism: An Anthology* (New Jersey:

'Priestley's "rational theology" led him to propound arguments not far removed from those of deism',[81] though Priestley was careful to distinguish his Christianity from deism. The similarities and differences between Priestley's arguments and those of the deists may be illustrated by a comparison between the *Discourses* and Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*, written almost simultaneously.

Paine's view of Christianity is remarkably similar to Priestley's view of corrupted Christianity:

> Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practise, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics. As an engine of power, it serves the purpose of despotism; and as a means of wealth, the avarice of priests; but so far as respects the good of man in general, it leads to nothing here or hereafter.
>
> The only religion that has not been invented, and that has in it every evidence of divine originality, is pure and simple Deism.[82]

There is little here that could not have been written by Priestley (albeit in less stirring language and style), assuming his subject was institutionalised Christianity. Priestley would depart from the above extract, however, at the suggestion that only deism has 'evidence of divine originality'. His task was to prove the worth of the evidence of revealed religion, whereas Paine dismisses revealed religion with characteristic brevity:

> All the corruptions that have taken place in theology, and in religion, have been produced by admitting of what men call *revealed religion.* [...] Since then all corruptions, down from Moloch to modern predestinarianism, and from the human sacrifices of the heathens to the Christian sacrifice of the Creator, have been produced by admitting what is called *revealed religion*, the most effectual means to prevent all such evils and impositions, is not, to admit of any other revelation than that which is

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Princeton, 1968), introduction; Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason: 1648-1789* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960; repr. 1983), pp. 159-68.

[81] *Pulpits and Politics*, pp.83-4.

[82] Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), p.686.

> manifested in the book of Creation; and to contemplate the Creation, as the only true and real word of God that ever did or ever will exist, and that every thing else, called the word of God is fable and imposition.[83]

Paine and Priestley agree that a deity is the first cause, but Paine is prepared to say little else about: 'the only idea man can affix to the name of God, is, that of a *first cause*, the cause of all things'.[84] Priestley, however, argued that deism itself is the product of revealed religion, for 'reason, or the light of nature' may only reveal intelligent causes, not the single intelligent cause revealed in the Old Testament: '*revealed religion* is the only foundation of what is termed *natural religion*'.[85] The failure among deists to recognise the dependence of their knowledge upon revealed religion, Priestley argued, is the 'offspring of a conceit of the powers of the human intellect'.[86] Similarly Priestley argues that the 'doctrine of the future state' could not be discerned without revelation: 'nothing that we see in nature can lead us to form any such expectation'.[87]

In order to make up for the limitations of natural theology, God had appointed 'ambassadors' to reveal the truths necessary to complete man's knowledge of his nature and destiny. The ambassadors were given the power of performing miracles so that their testimony would carry with it divine authentication:

> It was therefore a measure highly worthy of the wisdom and goodness of almighty God, in order to accomplish his gracious design of raising men to a state of glory and happiness, to appoint some persons to be, as it were, his ambassadors to the world lying in darkness and wickedness, to instruct them in the truths relating to their most important concerns, and to lay before them, with plainness and energy, the proper motives for reforming their conduct; and it was necessary that, for this purpose, these persons should come with authority, bearing evident tokens of a divine mission, by the

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[83] *Ibid*, p.699.
[84] *Ibid*, p.687.
[85] *Discourses*, p.210. It should be pointed out, however, that Priestley is not consistent on this point. He writes earlier in the *Discourses*, that the 'doctrine of the being of a God' is 'the dictate of nature', p.200.
[86] *Ibid.*, p.210.
[87] *Discourses*, p.325.

> working of *miracles*, or such works as men might be satisfied could not be performed without God (the author of nature, and who alone can control its laws) being with them. (*Discourses*, p.364)

The miracles are divine collateral, therefore, without meaning in themselves, but serving a variety of functions in the confirmation and dissemination of divine truths. Far from troubling Priestley's acceptance of the biblical narratives, the miracles were positive proof of 'divine power', and so authenticated Christianity and raised it above other religions:

> The truth of Christianity rests on the evidence of such visible marks of divine power, as the instant curing of the most dangerous disorders, and the raising of persons, and especially of Jesus himself, from a state of actual death, with respect to which, men who had only eyes, ears, and other natural senses, could not possibly be deceived; whereas, no visible miracle of any kind was so much as pretended to by either *Mahomet* or *Swedenborg*. (*Discourses*, pp.340-1)

Hence, the uniform operation of nature is the foil against which revealed religion may be recognised, and so Priestley is able to maintain his mechanistic view of the creation, whilst admitting of divine violations of the machine.

Revelation was a temporary intervention in history for the purpose of supplementing natural theology, Priestley argued. Through this belief he could counter the scepticism that the miracles form no part of the 'uniform experience' of man, and so must be considered falsehoods.[88] Priestley argued that the Bible contains all that is necessary to 'induce men to reform their conduct, and to fit them, by a life of virtue here, for a state of happiness hereafter'.[89] All that needed to be revealed had been revealed, and so there was no further need for God to suspend the laws of nature:

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[88] The argument that our 'uniform experience' does not contain the miraculous, and so human testimony of such should be disregarded, is famously expressed in Hume's 'Of Miracles', David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn, rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; repr. 1983), p.115.
[89] *Discourses*, p.378.

> When God had [...] imparted to mankind this most important information concerning himself and his moral government, concerning their duty here, and their expectations hereafter, nothing more was requisite in order completely to effect his great design, the reformation of the world, and the preparation of men for that future happy state which is announced to us in the gospel. For, with these helps, the rational nature that God had originally given to man was sufficient, without any supernatural operation upon their minds, to their restoration to his favour and their future happiness. [...]
> Accordingly, no farther help than this is ever promised to us in the gospel. [...] *The gift of the Spirit,* of which we read, always means some *miraculous power,* calculated for the confirmation of the gospel in the early ages only. (*Discourses*, pp.378-9)

The 'gifts of the Spirit' in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians are diverse, including 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' as well as the power to perform 'miracles' or to 'prophecy': but for Priestley they are all simply 'some *miraculous power*'.[90] Once the gospels were written, there was no further need for the Spirit to use man as an instrument, and enable him to perform miracles. It is to be expected therefore that subsequently, man would not encounter the miraculous, but this does not affect the possibility of the miracles having occurred.

The absence of the Spirit in Priestley's theology makes God a transcendent designer, who man will not encounter until the day of judgement. His creation operates according to the design (the fixed laws of nature) He established, but it no longer requires His direct intervention: 'no persons have immediate communications with God except prophets', he told the Swedenborgians.[91] His friend and fellow rational dissenter Richard Price (1723-91) considered the absence of a divine presence in Priestley's theology to be its fundamental shortcoming, as Michael Watts has pointed out:

> Price put his finger on the great weakness of Priestley's theological system, his neglect,

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[90] 1 Corinthians 12.

[91] *Letters to the NJC*, p.46. Priestley is not consistent in this however. In his 'Doctrine of Divine Influence on the Human Mind' (*Rutt*, xv, 82-178), Priestley accepts the possibility of 'instantaneous conversion' through 'sovereign and irresistible grace', and even suggests that revealed religion is a quicker path to 'true religion' than 'the gradual acquisition of it by the mere use of reason.' But this is unusual in Priestley.

> if not denial, of the work of the Holy Spirit. For the previous two centuries the great innovators in English religious history—John Smyth, George Fox, the Wesleys—had all placed great emphasis on the work of the Spirit, but Priestley wrote that the Deity 'has no local presence' and took Bishop Warburton to task for maintaining 'that the Spirit of God abides with the Church for ever'. (*The Dissenters*, p.476)

The contrast with the Wesleys is one that Coleridge would make when expressing concern that Priestleian Unitarianism lacks a basis in feelings.[92] Whereas Priestley insisted on faith as being founded on historical evidence, Wesley appealed to 'inward evidence' that is experienced and whose force may be felt by any. Southey quotes Wesley describing this contrast and its implications:

> The historical evidence of revelation, strong and clear as it is, is recognisable by men of learning alone; but this is plain, simple, and level to the lowest capacity. The sum is, 'One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see': an argument of which a peasant, a woman, a child, may feel all the force. The traditional evidence gives an account of what was transacted far away, and long ago. The inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times, and in all places.[93]

As will be discussed in the next chapter, Coleridge was compelled both by historical and inward evidence as the basis of his faith, idealising a faith founded on both philosophy and feeling.

The absence of an intervening deity in Priestley's theology effectively placed great emphasis on the role of the minister in Unitarianism. The minister needed to preach God's system in order to school his followers into practises that would fit them for the last judgment, the time when God would once again deal directly with man. The next section of this chapter explores how Priestley's reading of the Bible and his conception of deity, relate to his vision of humanity and a reformed society.

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[92] 'Socinian moonlight – Methodism a Stove! O for some Sun to unite heat & Light!' *CN* i. 467 (1802).
[93] Robert Southey, *Life of John Wesley*, ed. Arthur Reynolds (London: Hutchinson, 1903), p.239.

iii. 'The Prevailing Spirit of Commerce, aided by Christianity'[94]

Priestley's rationalism is not as thoroughgoing as his claims would suggest. At the same time as attempting to fix the meaning of a given text or book, Priestley's conviction that Christianity is above all a *practical* religion, diminishes the importance of detailed analysis:

> Christianity is much less to be considered as a system of doctrines, than as a rule of practice. Nay, the doctrines themselves (the chief of which is that of a future state of retribution) have no other object than the regulation of our lives. (*Discourses*, pp.352-3)

And so Priestley's theological arguments are conducted in the context of an attempt to direct his audience away from the complexity of the doctrines of the Church, and towards a view of Christianity as a practical means of regulation, in preparation for the last judgement. Indeed so central is the carrot and stick of the doctrine of the future state, that assuming it informs our actions in this life, theological 'error in judgment' may bring no harm:

> Lame and imperfect as many systems of Christianity are, we [Unitarians] admit that while they teach the doctrine of a future state, and that man's future happiness or misery does in any way depend upon, or correspond to, their moral conduct here, they have so much good in them, as may counteract all the evil; and we believe that if the temper of the mind be in the main right, no error in judgment will exclude any man from heaven. (*Letters to the NJC*, p.64).

Just as Priestley's approach to the Bible subordinated particulars to the general tenor of a given passage, so the 'temper of the mind' need only be 'in the main right'. The strength of this position is twofold: firstly it is a tolerant position, and this is reflected in Priestley's openness to other religious opinions; secondly it offers a relatively minimal basis for faith, requiring only a belief in the future state and the Last

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[94] *Discourses*, p.255.

Judgement. His toleration of 'error in judgment', however, undercuts Priestley's conviction that faith must be the offspring of reason. He does not make it clear why a person must arrive at their faith in the future state through rational investigation, or why he sees 'implicit faith' to be an impediment to 'true' Christianity. The reason he gives is that the heart 'can only be engaged by the force of persuasion', a reflection of Priestley's pessimistic view of the possibility of virtue, unless originating in rational principles:[95]

> The judgment, or understanding, must first be enlightened, before the will can be renewed, the affections regulated, and the conduct reformed; as, in all cases, a thing must be *understood* before it can be *practised.* (*Discourses*, p.354)

It is not at all clear why the 'implicit faith' Priestley criticises above is not a sufficient motive to believe in the Last Judgment. Nevertheless defending the evidence upon which a faith ought to be based is the chief characteristic of Priestley's ministry.

He places emphasis on understanding and self-discipline through the metaphors he deploys to describe the relationship between God and man. Typically God is parent or headmaster and man is the child or pupil:

> We should all habitually consider one another as brethren, the children of the same great Universal Parent, the care of the same benevolent Providence, as training up in the same school of moral discipline here, and as heirs together of the same glorious hope of eternal life hereafter. To fit us for these devotional and social duties, we should also be careful to exercise a constant government over our appetites and passions. (*Discourses*, p.353)

God is an absent parent or school master, having left enough clues in the Bible, for the pupils to learn of the plan of Providence. This representation of the deity as a divine pedagogue, gave Priestley a very important role: he too was an educator, a preacher,

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[95] *Discourses*, pp.383-4.

and experimenter, enacting in miniature the role of his 'Parent'.

This view of life elevates scholarly abstemiousness as the means of eliciting divine favour, not in this life but at the end of time. Mortal life 'is only a state of probation and discipline, calculated to train us up for a future and more glorious state after death'.[96] Indeed Priestley found mortality itself to be a lesson, writing of 'the great teacher Death' in a letter to the Rev. Price.[97]

'This life' is subordinate only, however, in relation to the total happiness promised in the 'future state'. Priestley's optimism informed his excitement at the progress of mankind towards perfection, and this life is the opportunity to experience a foretaste of the eternal happiness that awaits the deserving. Indeed Priestley's definitions of God and man centre on happiness:

> It is acknowledged that man is superior to brute creatures, and that this superiority *consists in his capacity of being much happier in himself, and in his power of* contributing in a more eminent degree to the happiness of others; by which means he makes nearer approaches to his Maker, who is supremely benevolent, and superlatively happy. (*Discourses*, p.1)

It is not surprising perhaps, that Priestley was noted for his contented disposition, and even Burke in 1781 when the men were on friendly terms, visited Birmingham and described him 'the most happy of men, and most to be envied'.[98] Kramnick has described how 'happiness' is the principal objective of Priestley's ministry:

> The quest for happiness on this earth preoccupied Priestley the philosophe. It informs his religion, and it structures his science. In his *Catechism for Children and Young Persons*, the question is posed, 'What did God make you and all mankind for?' the answer is given, 'He made us to be good and happy.' Even more significant is the reply to the question, 'Will not an application to worldly business interfere with the duties of religion?' 'No,' Priestley replies, 'we please God the most, by doing that which makes ourselves and others the most happy.' In his *Sermons* the same theme is struck. Our

[96] *Discourses*, p.9.
[97] *Unitarian Radicalism*, p.57.
[98] *Priestley's Writings*, p.29.

> lives and work have one objective, 'the glorious, animating prospect of the happy state of mankind.' (*Kramnick*, p.7).

For Priestley the spread of Unitarianism was central to the regulation necessary for happiness in this and the next life. But standing in its way were the Church and State, and to a lesser extent the Monarchy. The power of these institutions ought to be dramatically curtailed, and have jurisdiction only over those areas Priestley considered appropriate to their function:

> The state, according to Priestley, deals with 'things that relate to this life,' while the church deals with 'those that relate to the life to come.' The liberal state, then, is restricted to a specific purpose. It does no more or no less than provide a 'secure and comfortable enjoyment of this life, by preventing one man from injuring another in his person or property.' The magistrate has no concern with opinions or beliefs. His sole duty 'is to preserve the peace of society.' The state punishes only 'if I break the peace of society, if I injure my neighbour, in his person, property or good name,' not if I believe in different creeds. 'How,' Priestley asks, 'is any person injured by my holding religious opinions which he disapproves of?' If the answer is that such opinions endanger the salvation of others, it is still inappropriate for the state to interfere, for its 'business is with the things of this life only.' [...] For early liberals like Locke, Jefferson, and Priestley, the separation of church and state becomes the crucial defining feature of liberal politics. (*Kramnick*, pp.19-20).

Priestley presents the union of Church and State as giving unreasonable legal privilege to the former, at the price of becoming merely 'an engine of state'. And though their separation would inevitably bring about a great reduction in the size of the Church (and of course the cost to the poor in tithes), it would be replaced by an individualistic religion based on free rational inquiry. There would still be ministry for preaching and serving, but not the privileged positions of the episcopacy, as he explains in the *Letters to Burke*:

> There will still be religion, and of course ministers of it, as there will be teachers of philosophy and practitioners in medicine; but it will no longer be the concern of the state. There will be no more Lord Bishops or Archbishops, with the titles and powers of temporal princes. Every man will provide religion for himself, and therefore it will be such as, after due enquiry, and examination, he shall think to be founded on truth and

> best calculated to make men good citizens, good friends, and good neighbours in this world, as well as to fit them for another. (*Priestley's Writings*, p.256).

Priestley goes on to explain to Burke the reduced role of the monarchy in his utopian vision. In its present state, he argues, it simply burdens the nation with taxes, and principally in order to pay for wars conducted for no good reason. The reformed institution would be at the most a constitutional monarchy, but stripped of any pomp and ceremony:

> In this new condition of the world, there may still be kings, but they will be no longer sovereigns or supreme lords, no human beings to whom will be ascribed such titles as those of most sacred or most excellent majesty. There will be no more such a profanation of epithets, belonging to God only by the application of them to mortals like ourselves. There will be magistrates appointed and paid for the conservation of order, but they will only be considered as the first servants of the people, and accountable to them. (*Priestley's Writings*, pp.256-7).

Priestley describes the means of transforming society into this brave new state with varying degrees of practicality. In the following extract, for example, he envisages a process somewhat similar to that Coleridge expected to enable the spread of the principles of the Pantisocracy:

> If time be allowed for the discussion of differences, so great a majority will form one opinion, that the minority will see the necessity of giving way. Thus will reason be the umpire in all disputes and extinguish civil wars as well as foreign ones. The empire of reason will ever be the reign of peace. (*Priestley's Writings*, pp.255)

Priestley's confidence in a rational consensus forming in international politics is similar to his hope for agreement on the 'plain and usual acceptance of the words' in the Bible.

At other times, Priestley is more practical. His radicalism was not simply a matter of contracting the role of Church and State, to a less invasive form of religious and civil

government, and expecting universal acquiescence. He wished to replace these central authorities with an expanded role for the commercial sector. And as Kramnick has persuasively argued, Priestley's liberalism had a disturbing authoritarian aspect, in which the utilitarian goals would be achieved through potentially coercive means:

> One part of Priestley's liberalism preaches liberation, the freeing of all individuals and their rights from existing restraints – tyranny, the state, priests, and superstition. Another part of Priestley's liberalism subjects individuals to new discipline and new forms of authority: factories, jails, schools, hospitals run by scientific minds, and scientific legislators, who teach, order, and manage men to become industrious and hardworking. This latter aspect of Priestley's outlook explains why he and his circle, men like Howard, Percival, and Wedgwood, were such passionate reformers. They were not simply interested in sweeping away ancient and feudal barriers that hindered a free and good society. They were also convinced that one could then move to a positive stage of managing, engineering, and creating a good and happy life that would not emerge in and of itself by merely getting rid of priests, tyrants, and superstition. Science and materialism cut both ways. They undermined the old order, liberating and freeing man from timeless domination and mystery. They also promised a new day when scientific leadership will produce great happiness for great numbers by manipulating men and their motions, even if achieving such happiness involved the sacrifice of freedom. (*Kramnick*, p.29).

The new society would operate like a machine and the engine of this machine would be the 'lower ranks of society'. Priestley did not seek an egalitarian society, but a bourgeois system with the educated only, holding political power, as Willey has described:

> The good of the community does not and cannot require perfect political liberty in England. None but 'persons of considerable fortune', or those with the best education, are eligible for the highest offices. [...] Millionaires are, in fact, Nature's elect – those to whom obedience to natural law has opened the earthly paradise. (*Eighteenth Century Background*, pp.196 & 202-3)

Clearly this celebration of commerce views would be anathema to the young Coleridge, whose egalitarian approach to Property is the antithesis of the

'accumulative system'.[99]

What becomes clear from these extracts, however, is Priestley's utilitarian perspective. His tendency to diminish the local and particular to the general, manifests in a readiness to stomach the casualties of social policy with a panglossian complacency. This is particularly striking in his attitude towards the French Revolution. Whilst referring to 'the great crisis' faced by the French, for example, Priestley takes comfort from his certainty that the result 'though calamitous to many, perhaps to many innocent persons, will eventually be most glorious and happy'.[100]

His diminution of the particular and local context in his thinking generally, informed his sweeping statements about progress and Providence.[101] Like a divine clock, the creation ticks its way to completion, with every event playing a role in the progress. Priestley barely explores the need for good to come through evil, but simply states that 'every thing, without distinction, may be safely ascribed to God. Whatever terminates in good, philosophically speaking, is good. [...] God is the *author of sin* (as, upon the scheme of necessity, he must, in fact, be the author of all things)'.[102]

In consequence of the divine origin of everything that occurs, Priestley describes man as 'the great instrument in the hand of Providence'.[103] And so when describing his vision of the 'happy state of things', the agency of change is both the 'common parent of mankind', and human agency. The following extract from the *Letters to Burke*, based on Isaiah's vision of the Day of the Lord, makes this clear:[104]

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[99] Cf. *LPR*, pp.225ff. See following chapter.
[100] *Priestley's Writings*, p.258.
[101] It is interesting in this context to consider Priestley's response when he was elected to the French National Assembly in 1792. He declined the invitation on account of his poor French, and notably, because he had 'little knowledge of local conditions' (*Garrett*, p.59). He had no reservations on pronouncing the events to be, in general terms, a source of great satisfaction however.
[102] *Philosophical Necessity*, pp.510-1.
[103] *Discourses*, p.193.
[104] Isaiah ch.2; see also Micah ch.4.

> This, Sir, will be the happy state of things, distinctly and repeatedly foretold in many prophecies, delivered more than two thousand years ago, when the common parent of mankind will cause wars to cease to the ends of the earth, when man shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks, when nation shall no more rise up against nation, and when they shall learn war no more. This is a state of things which good sense, and the prevailing spirit of commerce, aided by Christianity and true philosophy cannot fail to effect in time. (*Priestley's Writings*, p.255).

Although this vision of the happy future is expressed in explicitly prophetic language, the means of achieving this end is expressed in an order that is revealing: 'good sense, and the prevailing spirit of commerce, *aided* by Christianity and true philosophy'. This hierarchy suggests that Christianity is but a component part of the perfecting of history, which progresses through commerce and good sense primarily.

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Priestley's rationalism inspired him with confidence that his theological conclusions were neither inherited nor idiosyncratic. His beliefs were established through, what he considered to be, objective procedures that enabled him to *prove* their worth. His procedures are essentially the same as he used in natural philosophy: a process of accumulating sufficient evidence to support a given hypothesis, and committing to an explanation that is both simple, and accounts for the given phenomena. For Priestley this procedure informed his beliefs with objectivity, but it also admitted the possibility that further evidence might lead to a different conclusion; hence his commitment to free inquiry and challenging received authority. The implicit conditionality of his beliefs, however, is rarely stressed in his work. On the contrary, Priestley's writing is suffused with a cool confidence that his beliefs are simply correct.

With the privilege of hindsight, it is almost amusing to list the catalogue of errors that Priestley's method produced. His failure to recognise the nature of

'dephlogisticated air' (oxygen) has already been noted, but another of his innovations (soda water) nearly had serious consequences when he was offered a place as scientific observer on Captain Cook's second expedition:

> Priestley was convinced, and had convinced the Admiralty, that his soda water was a cure for scurvy; it might well have replaced Cook's vegetable concoctions on the long voyage, with fatal results. (*Priestley's Writings*, p.22).

Fortunately Priestley's unorthodox theological beliefs convinced the Admiralty not to take him on the voyage.

Priestley's reading of American politics was also somewhat clouded by his enthusiasm for its secular constitution. He wrote to Burke:

> When the nature and uses of all civil offices shall be well understood, the power and emoluments annexed to them will not be an object sufficient to produce a war. Is it at all probable that there will ever be a civil war in America? (*Priestley's Writings*, p.253).

But perhaps the most notable case of misplaced confidence relates to his millenarianism. He became increasingly obsessed with predicting its arrival and mapping biblical prophecies onto the dramatic changes in Europe, until his death in 1804.[105] Somewhat unwisely in 1794, he even suggested to Thomas Belsham (1750-1829) when the event might happen: 'you may probably live to see it. I shall not. It cannot, I think, be more than twenty years'.[106]

These examples have been cited not simply to highlight Priestley's fallibility, but to illustrate a tendency in Priestley to be blithely confident of his method of analysis and his conclusions. At its worst, this manifests in a complacent acceptance of the

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[105] *Garrett*, p.53.
[106] Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the late Theophilus Lindsey MA*, quoted in *Unitarian Radicalism*, p.35.

necessity for the suffering and death of many, in the name of Providence. This optimism tends to dilute the urgency of much of his prose also, for the worst calamity is but a necessary link in the chain connecting past, present, and future. His confidence also manifests in a lack of concern for intellectual rigour and consistency in his writing, as demonstrated by his selective use of the Bible, and a lack of clarity in distinguishing between a rational and a practical basis for belief.

It is undoubtedly true, however, that the absence of scepticism (let alone doubt) in Priestley's thought, was enabling. He was able to write on an extraordinary range of subjects, and make valuable and highly influential contributions to many fields. John A. Passmore has related Priestley's range to his education and work in dissenting academies: 'Had Priestley gone to Oxford, he might have been – and certainly with great advantage – less voluminous, clearer, more methodical, a better scholar, and a more elegant writer'.[107] He goes on, however, to make a virtue of this versatility, describing Priestley's mind as 'not quite of the first order in intellectual penetration, but bold, energetic, commonsensical, unrestricted by an undue respect either for tradition or for the entrenched prejudices of specialists.'[108] These qualities were certainly necessary to give him the confidence to dismiss nearly two thousand years of Church history as the steady growth of corruption and misunderstanding, and to attempt to minister Unitarianism as the one true reading of the Bible and nature.

Priestley's mission to 're-christianize' the world remained the central purpose of his life, but both his ministry and the Unitarian cause were substantially impaired by his emigration, as Nicolas Roe has described:

> Priestley's exile signified much more than government intolerance and national ingratitude. Coming within months of Frend's banishment from Cambridge, it

[107] *Priestley's Writings*, p.9.
[108] *Priestley's Writings*, p.37.

> constituted a major loss of intellectual and spiritual leadership for which Coleridge's own efforts as a lecturer during 1795 would offer some redress. (*Radical Years*, p.98).

It is with Coleridge's first efforts in the cause of Unitarianism that the following chapter is concerned.

3

'Caesar' and the 'Woman in White'

'Religion' in the Bristol Lectures

Coleridge begins and ends his 'Six Lectures on Revealed Religion' (hereafter the *Lectures*) with striking images of 'Religion'. The first is the Woman in White, an allegorical goddess taken from the book of Revelation, with a countenance displaying 'deep Reflection animated by ardent Feelings'.[1] She stands in a vast plain beneath the open skies of the valley of life, enabling views of what lies beyond the valley. The final lecture ends with religion represented as 'Caesar within us', exerting a 'virtuous despotism' over our hearts, and leading 'our own Passions in triumph'.[2]

The Woman in White is contrasted with a false goddess who is worshipped as 'Religion', and who by allusion may be recognised as the Whore of Babylon. She is shrouded in the darkness of the 'temple of superstition', and silently expects unquestioning faith in her mysterious doctrines. She is Coleridge's representation of the 'corruptions' of Christianity, and in particular the Church of England. A group within the temple whose 'eyes were piercing, and whose Foreheads spoke Thought' are driven to dissent, and breaking out into the light of the valley, encounter the true goddess. Some of those sufficiently enlightened to leave the temple have become prejudiced against anything in the name of religion, and so reject the Woman in White also, when they encounter her in the valley. The Church, so the allegory suggests, has precipitated atheism.

The image of religion as an internal Caesar takes its significance from a contrast

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[1] *LPR*, 90.
[2] *LPR*, 229.

with Nero, an external tyrant representing civil government. Coleridge traces the origins of government to the 'early ages of man', during which the 'ungoverned Passions' of humanity necessitated external institutional control.[3] In time governments became the cause and not just the effect of social ills, leading to greater inequality and wars. Coleridge seeks to undermine external government by restoring an inner faith so that each individual is self-governed. This would precipitate a gradual accumulative disenfranchising of external government, and so herald a new social order without the need for external revolution.

The 'Woman in White' is passive, plainly beautiful, unimposing, virtually silent, and located in a natural setting. She is the paradigm for the nature of the arguments Coleridge would put forward in defence of his religious outlook in the *Lectures*, persuading by their self-evident truth and not by legal obligation. 'Caesar', by contrast, is little more than a force of self-regulation and restraint, sufficiently powerful to enable each individual to resist their own 'Avarice and appetites'.[4] The unlikely figure of Caesar as a representation of religion, is the product of Coleridge's rhetorical play, vaguely related to Luke 20.25 quoted a little earlier in the lecture: 'render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's'. These images enclose six lectures in which Coleridge attempts to demonstrate to Christians and Infidels alike, that his conception of religion is the product of a rational and impartial reading of the Bible. His project is to set out his arguments such that a prior faith in Christianity is unnecessary; a rational and unprejudiced approach to the 'evidences' of Christianity is all that is needed.

Although Priestley was not given to the use of literary figures, the qualities that these images represent are recognisably Priestleian. The unadorned appearance of the

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[3] *LPR*, 219.
[4] *LPR*, 229.

goddess suggests the minimal theology of Unitarianism, and the despotic influence of Caesar resembles Priestley's understanding of Christianity as a practical system of regulation. The *Lectures*, delivered within a year of the publication of Priestley's *Discourses*, are very much a Priestleian project as I will show in this chapter. Priestley's method and theology, however, were in some senses unsuited to the emotional component of Coleridge's religious ideas; Coleridge's ideal was a religion 'animated by ardent feelings'. Consequently the *Lectures* often exhibit a tension between what Coleridge sets out to do, and what he actually does. He sets out to give reasons for the basis of his Christian beliefs, but tends to proclaim his views as axiomatic. He sets out to deliver arguments that the rational and unprejudiced could accept whether Christian or otherwise; but for atheists he offers an extended diatribe in a mocking and patronising tone against their ignorance and sensuality.

A further problem in the *Lectures* is created by the nature of Coleridge's alternative to the Ministries: the influence of the model of reform based on internal government would be gradual and essentially non-interventionist. Yet Coleridge conceived of his system as the means of bringing about the Kingdom of God, which he defined as 'the progressiveness of the moral World'.[5] The dramatic imbalance between the gradual process Coleridge preaches, and the glorious outcome, most clearly manifests in the inconsistent rhetorical control throughout the *Lectures*. Coleridge attempts, I will argue, to compensate for his rather conservative model of reform by highly-charged rhetoric that forms a striking contrast with the passive image of religion represented by the 'Woman in White'.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first explores the context in which the *Lectures* were delivered, and in particular, the importance of John Prior Estlin to the

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[5] *LPR*, 227.

project. This section also makes a detailed examination of the arguments Coleridge used to defend revealed religion, and by comparing his use of them with Priestley's in his *Discourses*, fundamental differences in their understanding of religion emerges. The second section explores how Coleridge applied his concept of religion to society, and in the final section, I argue that the differences between the *Lectures* and the *Discourses* are in important respects, rooted in the personalities of their authors.

i. 'In Bristol I have Endeavoured to Disseminate Truth'

In the years 1794-5 Coleridge was somewhat alienated from the orthodox academic circles of Cambridge, and his correspondence during this period shows a concern to integrate himself into a network of prominent Unitarians. He told Southey in September 1794 that among the subscribers to the never-written 'Imitations from the Modern Latin Poets' were John Disney, Theophilus Lindsey, and Gilbert Wakefield.[6] And again in a letter to George Dyer of February 1795 he would write: 'To Mr Frend present my most grateful respect – God almighty bless him! – To Gilbert Wakefield mention my name as of one who remembers him respectfully'.[7]

The Unitarian network enabled Coleridge to mix with educated men who prized rationalism in religious beliefs, and who were engaged on a cause to be free at least from obligation to the test acts, and at best, reform the religious manners of the nation. The Unitarians were as excited by Coleridge taking up the cause as he was to have found a cause suited to his situation, as Cottle records: 'When Mr. Coleridge first came to Bristol [...] he had evidently adopted at least to some considerable extent, the sentiments of Socinus. By persons of that persuasion, therefore, he was hailed as a

[6] Cf. *CL* i. 101.
[7] *CL* i. 153.

powerful accession to their cause.'[8] Taking up the baton in the mid-1790s was at best a mixed blessing for Coleridge. Priestley emigrated as the tide of popular opinion was turning against the French Revolution and any who appeared to sympathise with it. A year later as Coleridge began to address the public, the mood was even more reactionary, and would soon be entrenched by the 'gagging acts' of late 1795.[9]

The immediate inspiration for the lectures was to raise funds for the Pantisocracy, but by January 1795 the System had become little more than an experiment in cooperative farming in Wales.[10] Coleridge describes the purpose of his lectures in somewhat grander terms than to generate income, however: 'since I have been in Bristol I have endeavoured to disseminate Truth by three political Lectures'.[11] The first of these would be published – to avoid charges of treason according to Coleridge[12] – as *A Moral and Political Lecture* in early February.[13] To see himself as preaching 'Truth' in political sermons, though a little pompous, reflects Coleridge's premise that the religious beliefs of society are the key to understanding its problems and their solutions. 'A Letter from Liberty' which begins *Conciones*, for example, represents Religion as the 'kind Mistress' of Liberty, but who has been replaced in Court by the Whore. Consequently Despotism and not Liberty wields power in England.[14]

It is not surprising, therefore, that Coleridge considered his lectures as sermons. *A Moral and Political Lecture*, for example, became a part of *Conciones ad Populum*

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[8] *Cottle*, p.70.
[9] 'The Two Acts, passed into law 18 Dec 1795, were (1) the Treasonable Practices (or Treason) Bill, which made treasonable the stirring-up by speech or writing of hatred of king or constitution, and (2) the Seditious Meetings (or Convention) Bill, which empowered magistrates to disperse political meetings of fifty persons of more. C's *Plot Discovered* (1795) was written in opposition to these acts.' *TW*, 5n.
[10] *CL* i. 132 & 150.
[11] The first of these was published as *A Moral and Political Lecture*. Cf. *LPR*, xxvii-xxx.
[12] *CL* i. 152.
[13] Cf. *LPR*, 2.
[14] *LPR*, 29-31.

published in November 1795, and which Coleridge referred to as the first of his 'Lay-sermons'.[15] In the preface, quoting the preacher of Ecclesiastes, Coleridge writes that he could not keep silent as he '"considered all the oppressions that are done under the Sun, and [...] the Tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of the oppressors there was power."'[16]

Coleridge's religious analysis of society prompted John Prior Estlin to join with others, including the Cottle brothers, in patronising the series of revealed religion.[17] Not only was Coleridge committed to the cause of Religion, but also he must have appeared something of a phenomenon, to be able to speak eloquently of the major political events of the day at only twenty-two. *A Moral and Political Lecture*, for example, is a bold analysis of the causes of the French Revolution, and the principles of the English 'Friends of Liberty'.[18] And as well as taking on many of the major voices of the day (the Church and State primarily, but radicals as well), his literary sensitivity and rhetorical force must have made his performances affecting to men like Estlin and Cottle.

Estlin was the Unitarian minister of Lewin's Mead Chapel, Bristol where he preached to 'the wealthiest congregation in the city, many aldermen and common councillors being members'.[19] Unitarian congregations had a considerable appetite for lengthy discourses from the pulpit or the press. Priestley for example, had delivered two of his *Discourses* before a congregation, in one sitting, adding a further

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[15] *LPR*, xxxiii.
[16] *LPR*, 27.
[17] *LPR*, xxxv.
[18] *LPR*, 8.
[19] D.J. Ivory, 'Stokes Croft Endowed School and Almshouse, Bristol 1722-1940 (published by the author, 1979), p.9. Ivory describes the growing popularity of the chapel: 'The chapel in Lewin's Mead had by 1788 become too small for the Unitarian congregation so they purchased adjoining land belonging to the Bartholomew Hospital estate and a large semi-classical chapel was opened on 4 September 1791. [...] So many families arrived from the suburbs by coach that mews were built in the chapel yard for sheltering their horses.'

ten to extend the published work to more than four hundred pages.[20] Estlin delivered his own *Evidences of Revealed Religion* from his pulpit on Christmas Day 1795, a discourse of nearly sixty pages, and again in the Essex-Street Chapel in London on January 17 1796.[21] To preach a defence of Christianity on Christmas Day, when most Christian congregations would be celebrating the birth rather than defending it, is suggestive of the intellectual nature of Unitarianism. This is also reflected in the repetition of the sermon within a month; rather than extemporising in accordance with the feelings of the moment, let alone the inspiration of the Spirit, the quality of the argument is prized.

Estlin's arguments were greatly indebted to Priestley generally, and his *Discourses* in particular. The epigraph to Estlin's *Evidences* is an allusion to 1 Peter 3.15, the same text used by Priestley in the preface to the *Discourses*:

> Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.

Unlike Priestley, Estlin quotes the text exactly as it appears in the King James, and so not substituting 'answer' for 'reason', and not omitting the comments on the tone of the answers: 'with meekness and fear'. Moreover, Estlin begins his discourse by extrapolating on this advice:

> With meekness and fear – or with mildness and diffidence, in opposition to a petulant, dogmatical, and conceited spirit – will a person whose ruling principle is a love of truth, and who is anxious to promote its general reception in the world, from a conviction of its importance to human happiness. [...] If this be the spirit with which we should examine the evidences of Christianity; if this be the spirit with which it should be proposed to the reception of mankind; this is likewise the spirit with which it should be attacked. (*Evidences*, pp.5-7).

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[20] *Discourses*, p.xi.
[21] John Prior Estlin, *Evidences of Revealed Religion and particularly Christianity stated with Reference to a Pamphlet called The Age of Reason* (Bristol: Biggs, 1796).

The voice of petulance, dogma, and conceit is Paine's in *The Age of Reason*, and Estlin makes a pious call to examine the evidences of Christianity in a spirit of mildness and diffidence. Paine is not a diffident writer in *The Age of Reason*, and all the more irreverently entertaining for it. Coleridge is closer to Paine than Estlin in this respect, except that Coleridge's target is infidelity rather than Christianity. Estlin's cautious tone is particularly notable in his discussion of the Church:

> The prophecies concerning Antichrist, which have been supposed to refer exclusively to the church of Rome, (though that is doubtless emphatically described by them), have probably a much more extensive application; and refer, not only to every assumed power of decreeing rites and ceremonies, and authoritatively interfering in matters of faith; but to that general corruption of doctrines, principles and morals, which has so long prevailed among the professors of Christianity. Every thing which is contrary to the purity and simplicity of the Christian religion, as well as every arrogated right to dictate to the consciences of others, is truly and properly *anti-christian.* How far this description may apply, either to individuals or bodies of men, let them impartially examine and determine for themselves. (*Evidences*, pp.41-2).

Whilst the essentials of the Unitarian critique of the Church are present – 'assumed power of decreeing rites and ceremonies', and the 'general corruption of doctrines' – the tone is moderate, and does not call for action but reflection: the prophecies 'have *probably* a much more extensive application', and, 'how far this description *may* apply [...] 'let them impartially examine and determine for themselves'.

Coleridge also alludes to 1 Peter 3.15 in his prospectus for the *Lectures*:

> These Lectures are intended for two Classes of Men—Christians and Infidels / to the former, that they may be able to give a reason for the hope that it is in them—to the latter that they may not determine against Christianity from arguments applicable to its Corruptions only. (*LPR*, 83)

Notably Coleridge does not include the instruction to answer with meekness and fear, although his pledge to give reasons and arguments suggests an attempt to let the

evidence speak for itself. Coleridge's perception of himself as a lecturer committed to cool reasoning and even-handed treatment of his subject, is further suggested by an amusing incident recorded by Cottle. A member of the audience in one of the lectures – he does not state which – began hissing, to which Coleridge replied: 'I am not at all surprised, when the red hot prejudices of aristocrats are suddenly plunged into the cool water of reason, that they should go off with a hiss!'[22] As one critic has pointed out, 'this was a clever reply, notwithstanding the inappropriate description of his own rhetoric as cool.'[23] Coleridge's forceful expression of his judgments of the Church and State were sufficient to prohibit his preaching from Estlin's pulpit as he would write a year later: 'political notoriety prevents my [reli]eving you occasionally at Bristol'.[24] Coleridge's representation of himself as a cool reasoner would continue to strike his audience as a misrepresentation over the coming year, notably in his exchange with Caius Gracchus in *The Watchman*.[25] In the *Lectures* the tension that is sometimes apparent between the nature of his arguments and his rhetoric, arises from the contrast between the Priestleian nature of the series, and Coleridge's complex and unsettled religious views at the time.

Estlin's patronage may have encouraged Coleridge to draw on Priestley's work in the lectures, but the rapid and enthusiastic adoption of his ideas is none the less striking. In preparation, Coleridge borrowed Priestley's *An History of the Corruptions of*

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[22] Quoted in *LPR*, pp.xxx-xxxi.
[23] *Ashton*, p.69.
[24] 22 August 1796, *CL* i. 233. Kitson has also pointed out considerable differences between their uses of language. 'Estlin very rarely does speak in figures [...] Coleridge, however, scarcely ever wrote without an acute awareness of the mysterious powers of language to communicate on several levels, and of its part in constructing that reality which it seeks to describe'. See Peter J. Kitson, 'The Whore of Babylon and the Woman in White: Coleridge's Radical Unitarian Language', in *Coleridge's Visionary Languages: Essays in Honour of J. B. Beer*, eds. Tim Fulford and Morton D. Paley (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), pp.1-14 (p.1).
[25] Cf. *TW*, 194-98. This is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

Christianity (1782) in the preceding month,[26] and as Peter Mann documents in the notes to his edition of Coleridge's lectures, Priestley's works were 'convenient quarries for material'.[27] The fact that Coleridge could quarry material from Priestley and use it more or less unchanged in his *Lectures* indicates the similarity in their intentions and methods. And although the lectures are indebted to an impressive range of sources, they are shaped into a design resting on Priestley's methodology and general intentions in his defences of revealed religion. Coleridge's extensive use of Priestley's arguments is likely to have been recognised by his audience, yet there is surprisingly little discussion of Priestley himself. Indeed he cites Priestley's inconsistency as evidence that when the Scriptures appear to contradict themselves, it does not follow that they are inauthentic: 'Dr Priestley in several of his writings appears to contradict what he had affirmed in others. Yet who doubt the authenticity of [his] writings?'[28] This perhaps indicates Coleridge's dissatisfaction with Priestley's system even whilst he relied heavily upon it.

Coleridge's decision to *lecture* on religion is revealing in itself. Lectures are not usually delivered in a devotional context, but Unitarian sermons tended to be rational discourses resembling lectures. Even so, his choice of a non-devotional context for lecturing meant that the lectures were open to the public and though Unitarians were more than likely a dominant presence, Coleridge could have expected a range of beliefs among his auditors.[29] Indeed Kitson stresses the targeting of 'infidels' by arguing that 'Coleridge's Unitarian discourse is an attempt to Christianize radicals like

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[26] George Whalley, 'The Bristol Library Borrowings of Southey and Coleridge', *The Library*, 4 (1949), 114-31 (p.119).
[27] *LPR*, lxvi.
[28] *LPR*, 186.
[29] Both Priestley's *Discourses* and Estlin's *Evidences*, by contrast, had been delivered to Unitarian congregations.

Thelwall who had been intellectually formed by the works of Godwin and Paine'.[30] This may well have been Coleridge's intention, but as I will argue, both the nature of the arguments, and the tone, Coleridge employs were unlikely to convince any but the converted.

The lecture form was appropriate for the argumentative nature of the 'Truth' Coleridge intended to disseminate, however. It gave him sufficient space to develop his arguments, and as an oratorical form, it suited Coleridge's eloquence. The series could accommodate his considerable range of reference, though even a project of this scale is small given the vastness of his intentions. He described the contents of the first lecture alone, as follows:

> An allegoric vision – proof of God's existence from universal order – origin of evil – necessity of revelation – defence of miracles – nature of virtue – defence of the Mosaic Law – authenticity of the books of Moses. (*LPR*, 89).

At the same, the lecture was not a suitable form for Coleridge at this stage of his religious development. It is not the ideal form for expressing contrary voices, doubts, and so forth, and the tensions that exist in the *Lectures* reflect the complexity of Coleridge's religious feelings. This becomes clearer by considering the arguments and methodology that Coleridge employed.

The allegory with which Coleridge begins the *Lectures*, in many respects, is a microcosm of the whole series. Just as the Pantisocracy was a relatively detailed scheme based upon a simple assessment of the problems of society as originating in one single cause (private ownership of property), so the *Lectures* are the detail that expand on the simple relationship between the Church and belief set out in the allegory. It is a somewhat mechanical representation of Coleridge's ideas much as its

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[30] Kitson, *Coleridge's Unitarian Language*, p.9.

closest stylistic influence is, John Aikin's 'The Hill of Science: A Vision'.[31] However, this is likely to have been a striking opening to his lecture series:

> It was towards Morning when the Brain begins to reassume its waking state, and our dreams approach to the regular trains of Reality, that I found myself in a vast Plain, which I immediately knew to be the Valley of Life. It possessed a great diversity of soils and here was a sunny spot and there a dark one just such a mixture of sunshine and shade as we may have observed on the Hills in an April Day when the thin broken Clouds are scattered over the heaven. (*LPR*, 89-90)

Coleridge presents himself as an inspired lecturer, whose vision of the nature of religion and belief came to him 'towards Morning when the Brain begins to reassume its waking state, and our dreams approach to the regular trains of Reality'.[32] The author in Coleridge's more famous dream vision, 'Kubla Khan', makes no such approach to reality, remaining 'in a profound sleep' and involuntarily composing 'without any sensation or consciousness of effort'.[33] Similarly the dream in *Pilgrim's Progress* occurs as the author lays down to sleep and dream; and Aikin's visionary finds that 'sleep insensibly stole upon me, as I was indulging the agreeable reveries which the objects around me naturally inspired'.[34] In Coleridge's allegory, however, he seems keen to emphasise that he is approaching 'the regular trains of Reality', making his vision as much a product of his reasoning mind as of an involuntary dream. This is perhaps suited to an audience assembled to hear *reasons* for adopting Christianity.

The allegory centres on two characterisations of 'Religion', and the reactions of various groups of people to these figures. The first is the Whore of Babylon, who

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[31] Quoted in Vicesimus Knox, *Elegant extracts: or, Useful and entertaining passages in prose, selected for the improvement of young persons* 4 vols (London: Law, 1797), iv, pp.801-3.
[32] The allegory may be found in *LPR*, 89-93.
[33] Preface to 'Kubla Khan', (*PW*, 511).
[34] *Elegant Extracts*, p.801.

resides in 'large and gloomy pile' at the entrance to the 'Valley of Life'.[35] Her character is a gothic rendering of the standard Unitarian criticisms of the Church: she sits in darkness, with a 'terrible yet vacant' countenance; the walls of her damp temple are inscribed by 'mysteries' and a guide instructs Coleridge to 'read and believe'; and 'men in Black Robes' collect tithes 'with scrupulous care'.[36]

A group whose 'eyes were piercing, and whose Foreheads spoke Thought, amid a much larger number who were enraged by the severity of the Priests exacting their Tenths [tithes]', break out from the temple, and into the natural light of the valley. There they behold the other the true representation of Religion: 'a Woman clad in white garments of simplest Texture' with a countenance that 'displayed deep Reflection animated by ardent Feelings'.[37] The Woman in White is both clearly visible and approachable, forming a dramatic contrast with the false goddess in the temple. The latter is indistinct – 'her features blended with darkness' – and to approach her through 'many a dark and winding alley', a ritualistic purification is required. The Woman in White declares no doctrine, and in fact all she says is 'my name is Religion'. The false goddess does not speak either, but her hall contained 'phosphoric Inscriptions – each one of the words separately I seemed to understand but when I read them in sentences they were riddles incomprehensible and contradictory'. The contrast between the almost silent Woman in White and the inscribed riddles of the false goddess, represents the doctrinal differences between the Church and Unitarianism. Whereas the Church obliges commitment to a number of doctrines – or riddles as they are represented in the allegory – Unitarians tended to commit to only two. Coleridge states these at the beginning of lecture five:

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[35] *LPR*, 90.
[36] *LPR*, 90.
[37] White garments are associated with the redeemed in the book of Revelation. See for example Rev. 3.18, 6.11, 7.9.

> That there is one God infinitely wise, powerful and good, and that a future state of Retribution is made certain by the Resurrection of Jesus who is the Messiah – are all the *doctrines* of the Gospel. (*LPR*, 195)

The allegory makes no reference to God at all, but the (only) actions of the Woman in White represent the doctrine of the future state:

> She led us to an Eminence in the midst of the Valley, on the Top of which we could command the whole Plain, and observe the Relation of its different Parts, each one to the other. She then gave us an optic Glass which assisted without contradicting our natural vision and enabled us to see far beyond the Valley.

Rosemary Ashton has pointed out the similarity to book eleven of *Paradise Lost* in which the Archangel Michael takes Adam to an 'eminence', enabling him to see the future generations of mankind.[38] The Woman in White enables a view of this life – 'we could command the whole Plain' – as well as the future state, not by means of an angel, but a telescope.[39]

The telescope is an odd but suitable metaphor by bringing together scientific investigation and religious truth, and within the structure of the allegory, it forms a contrast with the microscope of the 'old dim eyed man' in the 'Temple of Superstition'. This temple is the same that contains the false goddess, and also a 'vast and dusky cave' with 'Blasphemy' and 'Sensuality' at its mouth. The cave is 'unnaturally cold', to illustrate Coleridge's attitude to atheism as a belief produced by 'great selfwilledness joining with great coldness of affections'.[40]

'With the rapid Transition of a Dream', the visionary finds himself with the part of the group that were 'affrighted' at the name of Religion, as they enter the cave. They

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[38] *Ashton*, p.71.
[39] Peter Mann notes that '"Our natural vision" is Reason; the "optic glass" that assists it, revelation, or possibly faith (divested of any implications of "Mystery")' (*LPR*, 91n).
[40] *LPR*, 96.

represent the infidels who 'determine against Christianity from arguments applicable to its Corruptions only', described in the prospectus. The old man with his microscope examines 'Nature', but his Nature is a lifeless, headless, torso whose polished surface is shown to have irregularities by his microscope. This minute observation of parts contrasts with the commanding views of the valley and beyond, enabled by the Woman in White.

The visionary is awoken from his dream by the old man's discussion of causation:[41]

> He spoke in diverse Tongues and unfolded many Mysteries, and among other strange Things he talked much about an infinite Series of Causes—which he explained to be—a string of blind men of which the last caught hold of the skirt of the one before him, he of the next, and so on till they were all out of sight; and that they all walked straight without making one false step. We enquired, Who there is at the head to guide them. He answered No one, but that the string of blind men went on for ever without a beginning for though one blind man could not move without stumbling, yet that infinite Blindness supplies the want of sight. I burst into Laughter at this strange exposition and awoke.

Just as the 'Temple of Religion' had at its heart 'incomprehensible and contradictory [...] mysteries', so the old man in the precincts of the temple 'unfolded many Mysteries' including his conception of causation as a chain of 'infinite blindness' with no one at the head. Both the Christian with 'hereditary faith' and the atheist are therefore contained within the 'Temple of Superstition'; superstition is a component of any belief that could not be shown to be based upon reason, and for Coleridge, atheism was just this.

Clearly Coleridge's attitude towards infidelity is dramatically different to Priestley's. Whereas Priestley called upon infidels to help in ridding society of its attachment to superstitious religion, Coleridge at this time was repelled by atheism. Moreover, he began to acquire a more favourable view of superstition, valuing it for breaking the

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[41] See Priestley's *Matter and Spirit*, 149-50 for his rejection of the 'causeless succession of men', albeit in less mocking terms than Coleridge.

unimaginative attachment to sense experience.[42]

The Woman in White is a particularly suitable representation of Unitarianism, in some ways for the wrong reasons. She is a somewhat featureless figure, almost silent, unarresting, and inactive. Her character is largely defined by the contrast with the more indulgently rendering the false goddess.[43] When the allegory was re-used for an article in the *Courier* in 1811, the Woman in White is a more elaborate figure and even has elements of mystery, reflecting Coleridge's change to Anglicanism.[44]

Beginning the *Lectures* with this allegory, Coleridge is able to set out his analysis of beliefs in a controlled literary environment, rather as he hoped the Pantisocracy would represent his social aspirations. The allegory asserts rather than argues for Coleridge's religious outlook, and none but those who were already sympathetic to his views would have been moved by it. Certainly one cannot imagine an infidel having a sympathetic response, or gaining any insight into their own views.

That the visionary should awake in laughter at the arguments for causation by the old man, is indicative of the dismissive and mocking tone Coleridge takes towards infidels throughout the lectures. Immediately following the allegory he makes a kind of joke about atheism: 'if it were possible said an ancient Philosopher that I could disbelieve a God it would be for this, that there exists on Earth that intellectual

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[42] Coleridge's positive treatment of superstition is most explicit in 'The Destiny of Nations':

> For Fancy is the power
> That first unsensualizes the dark mind,
> Giving it new delights; and bids it swell
> With wild activity; and peopling air,
> By obscure fears of beings invisible,
> Emancipates it from the grosser thrall
> Of the present impulse, teaching self-control,
> Till Superstition with unconscious hand
> Seat Reason on her throne. (ll.80-88, *Keach*).

[43] In his *Lay Sermons*, Coleridge would criticise the Unitarian 'creed' for having definition only by unbelief in orthodox doctrines. *LS*, 181ff.

[44] Cf. *EOT* ii. 264-6. For the changes to the Woman in White in this version, see Kitson, *Coleridge's Unitarian Language*, pp.13-14.

Deformity an Atheist'.[45] This is unlikely to convince any infidels in the audience of an even-handed approach, any more than his argument in the final lecture that 'Irreligion' should be considered in the same breath as 'Drunkenness, Prostitution, Rapine, Beggary and Diseases', as the consequences of 'Commerce'.[46]

Clearly this approach to infidels forms a striking contrast with Priestley's favour for their rejection of State Christianity. Coleridge intended his lectures for 'Christians *and* Infidels', however, and so the first lecture is concerned to prove God's existence. He uses a version of the Argument from Design, but his source for the Argument is significant. He could very well have based it on Priestley's use of the argument in *Matter and Spirit*:

> For the same reason that the *table* on which I write, or the *watch* that lies before me, must have had a maker, *myself*, and the *world* I live in must have had a maker too: and a *design*, a *fitness of parts to each other*, and to an end are no less obvious in the one case than in the other. I have, therefore, the very same reason to conclude that an intelligent mind produced the one, as the other (meaning by the word *mind* the subject or intelligence) and my idea of the *degree* of intelligence requisite for each of these productions rises in proportion to the number of particulars necessary to be attended to in each, and the completeness with which they are adapted to the ends which they manifestly subserve. Judging by this obvious rule, I necessarily conclude, that the intelligence of the being that made myself and the world must infinitely exceed that of the person who made the table or the watch.
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> This simple argument for the being of a God, or an intelligent maker of all things [...] I consider as *irrefragable*. [...] This argument is, in fact, the foundation of all our practical and useful knowledge concerning God. (*Matter and Spirit*, p.148).

In this standard expression of the argument, Priestley works from his table and watch to the world, and by analogy from the table- and watch-maker to 'a God'. The '*degree* of intelligence' required to make these items is proportionate to their complexity, and so by implication, the study of the natural world could give insight into the intelligence of its maker. Priestley's language emphasises the machine-like quality of the creation, drawing attention to proportion, obvious rules, necessary

[45] *LPR*, 93.
[46] *LPR*, 224.

conclusions, leading to 'practical and useful knowledge'. Coleridge's use of the argument is much more impassioned:

> The evident contrivance and fitness of things for one another which we meet with throughout all parts of the Universe seems to make the belief of a Deity almost an Axiom. There is no need of nice or subtle Reasonings on this Subject—a manifest Contrivance immediately suggests a contriver. It strikes us like a sensation, and artful Reasonings against it may puzzle us, but never convince. No one for example that knows the principles of optics and the structure of the eye can believe that it was formed without skill in that Science, or that the Ear was formed without knowledge of Sounds, or that the male and female in animals were not formed for each other and for continuing the Species. All our accounts of Nature are full of instances of this kind and the more nicely we examine the relations of Things the more clearly we perceive their astonishing aptitude. This admirable and beautiful structure of things that carries irresistible Demonstration of intending Causality, exalts our idea of the Contriver—the Unity of the Design shows him to be *one*. (*LPR*, 93).

Mann points out that this whole passage 'is quoted with slight variations from Maclaurin'.[47] It is significant, however, that Coleridge chooses Maclaurin rather than Priestley. Maclaurin's account is not really an argument at all but a series of assertions based on feeling: 'there is no need of nice or subtle Reasonings' for the existence of a Deity is 'almost an Axiom [...] it strikes us like a sensation'. He does not refer to tables or watches, but to the 'admirable and beautiful structure of things', which 'exalts our idea of the Contriver'. Coleridge inserts the phrase 'that carries irresistible Demonstration of intending Causality': no argument, but a plea to submit to its irresistible truth.

Coleridge's account of the Argument from Design is relatively brief, perhaps reflecting both its currency, and his assumption that he would have had general agreement without having to labour the Argument. Priestley, for example, had written in 1777, 'I am not acquainted with any arguments more conclusive than these; that is, supposing a God to exist, it is not in nature possible, that there could have been more,

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[47] *LPR*, 93. 'Colin Maclaurin (1698-1746) *An Account of Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophical Discoveries* (1748), a standard exposition, borrowed by C[oleridge] from the Bristol Library', (*LPR*, 86).

or stronger evidence of it than we find'.[48] Any member of his audience familiar with a positive response to Priestley's well-known *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* would not be troubled by the Argument. In maturity, however, Coleridge records his disregard for the Design Argument as a convincing proof of Deity, in *Table Talk*: 'to set about *proving* the existence of a God by such means is a mere circle, a delusion'.[49] He had also, however, come to regard it as harmless, and the source of 'efficient good' when considered, not for its proof of Deity, but for the devotional habit of mind that could be inspired by belief in a divinely authored universe. William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802) expressed this view with particular clarity, arguing that the Design Argument could transform the world for a person who already accepted the existence of God:

> If one train of thinking be more desirable than another, it is that which regards the phenomena of nature with a constant reference to a supreme intelligent Author. To have made this the ruling, the habitual sentiment of our minds, is to have laid the foundation of every thing which is religious. The world thenceforth becomes a temple, and life itself one continued act of adoration. The change is no less than this: that whereas formerly God was seldom in our thoughts, we can now scarcely look upon any thing without perceiving its relation to him.[50]

There is an interesting account in Coleridge's notebooks of a discussion with Wordsworth and Hazlitt regarding Paley's *Natural Theology*. Following 'a most unpleasant Dispute with W.[ordsworth] & Hazlitt', Coleridge appears to agree with them that the Design Argument involves a pedantic interpretation of the world, but defends it on the grounds of the 'efficient good' that it produces: 'and what if Ray, Durham [sic.], Paley, have carried the observation of the aptitudes of Things too far, too habitually–into Pedantry?–O how many worse Pedantries! how few so harmless

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[48] *Matter and Spirit*, p.148.
[49] *LPR*, 94n.
[50] Quoted in Thomas McPherson, *The Argument from Design* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.12.

with so much efficient Good!'[51] Coleridge's defence of the Argument here is based on judging by the fruits of accepting the reasoning, and is applicable to some of the arguments of both Priestley in his *Discourses*, and Coleridge in the *Lectures*.

In the *Lectures* it would have taken Coleridge less than two minutes to deliver his section on the Argument from Design, enabling him, at least to his own satisfaction, to pass on to the nature of the proven Deity:

> Thus the existence of Deity, and his Power and his Intelligence are manifested, and I could weep for the deadened and petrified Heart of that Man who could wander among the fields in a vernal Noon or summer Evening and doubt his Benevolence! The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we may read the Transcript of himself. In Earth or Air the meadow's purple stores, the Moons mild radiance, or the Virgins form Blooming with rosy smiles, we see pourtrayed [sic] the bright Impressions of the eternal Mind. (*LPR*, 94).

There is an unexpected (and not entirely convincing) tear from Coleridge here, and he manages to resist pouring scorn on the man who doubts the Deity. The source for this extract is Mark Akenside, whose *Pleasures of Imagination* contains a similarly selective portrait of the natural world, on the basis of which he perceives the 'transcript' of the Deity.[52]

The collage with which Coleridge begins his lecture series – the allegoric vision, Maclaurin's version of the Design Argument, and Akenside on the benevolence of the eternal Mind – is likely to have appeared a rich and diverse performance. He has described a vision, attempted humour, related the Design Argument, illustrated his proof of divine benevolence with poetry, and he may well have found a sympathetic ear for his hostility towards infidelity. Not a typical Unitarian discourse.

Following the Akenside quote, however, Coleridge turns to 'abstruser Reasonings',

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[51] *CN* i. 1616. For John Ray (1627-1705) and William Derham (1657-1735) see *Eighteenth-Century Background*, pp.34-42.
[52] Cf. *LPR*, 95n.

with feigned reluctance, as if his axioms needed proving only to the stubborn. They are 'unentertaining indeed', he suggests but, 'with the Metaphysical Reasoner every fact must be brought forward and the ground must be well & carefully examined where the system is to be erected'.[53] The facts that Coleridge brings forward are largely derived from Ralph Cudworth and are an examination of theories of causation. In particular he contrasts the view of causation he had represented in the allegory by the unguided 'string of blind men', with a theory of divine causation. He suggests, in parody, that 'by the friendly cooperation of [...] unthinking essences you no doubt, can easily conceive that Milton's Paradise Lost might be produced or Euclid's Elements'.[54] This 'unintelligent intelligence' is a feeble substitution for a Deity, Coleridge argues: 'these are the Ignorant Omniscients to make place for whom we are exhorted by modern sages to exclude our God and Untenant the Universe'.[55] This is in fact a re-statement of the Argument from Design, suggesting as it does that intelligence cannot be generated by unintelligent constituents.

The significance of this conclusion is that Coleridge is attempting to demonstrate the existence and efficacy of God by suggesting that it is the most plausible hypothesis. Locke's theory of perception is foundational in the lectures, both directly and through Hartley and Priestley, who adopted his ideas. Coleridge wrote in the first lecture that 'our nature is adapted for the observation of Effects only and from the Effects we deduce the Existence and attributes of Causes but their immediate Essence is in all other cases as well as Deity hidden from us'.[56] Commenting on this passage, Peter Mann draws attention to its probable root in Maclaurin, and its philosophical basis in Locke:

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[53] *LPR*, 95.
[54] *LPR*, 99.
[55] *LPR*, 100.
[56] *LPR*, 97.

> This is a succinct statement of an argument in Maclaurin, where he stresses the difficulty of acquiring knowledge of the real nature of God even from our observation of his works, since the natural world appears to us only in the form of Locke's 'secondary qualities'; their 'substance' or real nature remains hidden from us, and so does God's. (*LPR*, 97n.)

Knowledge of God is not by immediate experience but by reflection on His works. Priestley describes how this account of perception related to experience of God in *Matter and Spirit*. We are able to experience 'secondary qualities' [repetition] only, and so the 'substance' or the real nature of the creation or Creator remains unknown. 'It is the *attributes*, the *powers* and the *character* of the Deity that alone concerns us', Priestley argued, 'and not his *essence*, or *substance*'.[57] Although Coleridge makes the same assumptions in the *Lectures*, as I have argued there is a tendency to root his arguments in sensation and aesthetic responses, rather than systematic reasoning as he purported to do.

Coleridge's discussion of the 'miracles' is remarkably lacking in aesthetic or literary sensitivity however. He devotes a good deal of attention to them in the *Lectures*, which is not surprising given that Priestley's *Discourses* were centred on the miracles, and like Priestley's, Coleridge's discussion emphasises the philosophical probability of their occurrence, rather than the particular significance of the miracles in their contexts. There is little exegesis but rather an attempt to show that it was perfectly rational to believe the miraculous *could* have occurred in a universe that is regulated by natural laws. The main proof that the miraculous had occurred was to show that history is inexplicable had the miracles not occurred.

In the first lecture, for example, Coleridge uses Hartley's argument that primitive man would not have survived without divine intervention: mankind would not

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[57] *Matter and Spirit*, p.138.

naturally (that is, without divine assistance) relate the pangs of hunger to the need to eat:

> Who was present to teach him [man] that the Pains which he felt proceeded from the want of Food or that opening his Mouth & chewing were the means of rendering useful what by accidental[ly] stretching out his hand he had acquired[.] There being no innate Ideas, I am unable to conceive how these Phenomena are explicable without Deity. (*LPR*, 103)

The implication is that humanity has developed beyond that which would naturally occur through the law of the association of ideas: this is to violate a law of nature, which could only occur through the direct influence of God.[58] Hence the very development of humanity was attended by the intervention of God.

His approach to the miracles in the Bible is similarly philosophical. Towards the end of the first lecture and throughout the second lecture, Coleridge sets the constitution established through Moses in the context of contemporary political systems. By arguing that the Mosaic system was so much greater than that which it replaced – 'for the Jews seem to have been grossly ignorant of every thing, and disposed to the grossest Idolatry'! – Coleridge concludes rhetorically: 'where Moses in that infant state of the World could have gained the model of so perfect a Government I cannot conceive, unless we allow [it] to have come from God'. [59]

Coleridge takes the same approach to character and 'system of morality of Christ:

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[58] Cf. *LPR*, 160n. Priestley uses virtually the same argument in *Discourses*, p27: 'A child left to itself would be more helpless than any other young animal. It must necessarily perish; and a grown man, with no more knowledge than a new-born child, would be as little able to take care of himself. Whenever, therefore, men were first produced, they must have had some instructions communicated to them by their maker; so that what we may properly call *divine revelation* was absolutely necessary in the first stage of our existence.'

[59] *LPR*, 135. See also Priestley's *Discourses*, pp253-4: Having described the Mosaic system, he concludes that 'in all other respects the Jews were certainly not more enlightened, or more civilized, than their neighbours. This great difference cannot be accounted for but by supposing that the Jews were taught of God, while other nations had been left to their vain imaginations.'

> That in the most corrupt Times of the Jewish state there should arise the Son of a Carpenter who in his own conduct presented a perfect example of all human excellence and exhibited a system of morality, not only superior to the ethics of any single Philosopher of antiquity but to the concentrated Wisdom of every Philosopher of every age and nation, and this unspotted by one single error, untinged with one prejudice of that most prejudiced people among whom he was educated is a fact that carries with it an irresistable force of conviction, and is of itself in the most philosophical sense of the word a Miracle. (*LPR*, 160) [60]

These sentiments reflect Coleridge's conviction that morality and education are essentially linked, also the basis of the Pantisocracy insofar as the new start to society required education to remove the corrupting stain of growing up in English society.[61] However, Coleridge is less concerned with Christ's perfect moral system itself, than with its divine origins:

> The end of the Mission of Christ was to recall men to a practical belief in the power and perfections of Deity. In order to this it became necessary in all his actions [that] the hand of God and not the authority of men should be evident. Hence it was ordered that he should be poor and uneducated, and consistently with the same plan, the persons whom he chose for Partners and Companions in this work were of the lowest Class as well as in Station as Abilities—subdued to him by the evidence of his Miracles, yet ignorant of his real Aim. These men sometimes distrusted and sometimes deserted him – And were therefore the most unexceptionable Instruments of his Design. To reform a *World*, to alter all its opinions and Customs, and solemnly to abrogate the Law delivered in Thunders from Mount Sinai, the Priests, the Rulers of the Aristocracy all combining to oppose them was a plan so novel and vast, that it is impossible to explain except by the divine interference how the Son of a Carpenter and a Tribe of fishermen could conceive, much less execute it. A miracle is something different from the known course of Nature and Experience; now in all experience and through all History can any fact be produced that bears any similarity or analogy to this? (*LPR*, 160-1)

In this passage Coleridge describes another value of the miracles: as a force for subduing his ignorant partners and companions. They too could not be convinced by Jesus' ministry, it is implied, unless he could subdue their scepticism with miracles. Again Coleridge does not celebrate what Christ says or does, but the phenomenon of his being the chosen instrument of God. As a Unitarian, Coleridge values Christ as

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[60] *LPR*, 160. Substantially the same argument is found in Priestley's 'Discourse IX: Of the Miracles of Jesus'.

[61] See chapter one.

evidence for God rather than for his ministry.

Although both Coleridge and Priestley rested many of their arguments on the principle that the truth of revealed religion was the most probable explanation of the historical facts, the last sentence in the above extract reflects an area of ambiguity concerning the miracles, common to both. A miracle was 'something different from the *known* course of Nature and Experience', and so, what appeared miraculous to one age would in a more enlightened age be seen to be the operation of a yet undiscovered law of nature.[62] The following extract from lecture one, illustrates this principle with regard to the discoveries of electricity and magnetism:

> It has been objected against Miracles that the course of nature is fixed and immutable – that this is evinced by the concurring testimony of all mankind – that therefore the Testimony of a few persons who affirm the contrary cannot be admitted. To this we answer – that each party testifies what it has seen, and why may not the Evidences of both be true? Nothing is more common or constant than the effect of Gravity in making all Bodies upon the surface of our Earth tend to its centre – yet the rare and extraordinary influences of Magnetism & Electricity were discovered and verified by a variety of concurrent facts, there would have been as much reason to disallow the evidence of their particular effects attested by Eyewitnesses, as there is now to disallow the particular Miracles recorded in Scripture. The miracles may have been and I doubt not were worked according to the Laws of Nature – although not by those Laws with which we are as yet acquainted. (*LPR*, 111-2)

The final sentence contains a revealing equivocation, however, in the suggestion that the miracles '*may* have been and I *doubt not*' worked according to laws yet to be discovered. This suggests a striving to commit to, though not a total conviction of, the ordered world that natural philosophy appeared to be proving. The reasons for this striving are obvious in the above extract: 'nothing is more common or constant than the effect of Gravity'. By showing that the miraculous did not contradict this

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[62] Priestley is more certain that God operates by rules even when performing miracles, though he is not consistent on this. In his *Institutes*, for example, he defines revealed religion as 'interruptions in the normal course of nature, by the interposition of the God of nature, the sole controller of laws which he himself has established' (*Rutt* ii. 111). In the *Discourses* he writes: 'We are not to expect that the Author of revelation should be any other being than the Author of nature, or that he should conduct himself by any other rules' (*Discourses*, p.262).

constancy – or if it did, it actually only appeared to do so through imperfect scientific knowledge – Coleridge could defend Christianity against scepticism and charges of superstition. It was important, however, that the miracles did appear miraculous when they occurred for they proved the influence of God. In this sense the very regularity of the laws of nature was the constant by which divine intervention could be established. Coleridge does not seem to have foreseen the endpoint of this thinking however: if the miracles occurred by undiscovered laws of nature, it suggests that God did not actually intervene, but simply that the limited perceptions of the witnesses kept the causes hidden. This is no longer revealed religion therefore, but the product of relative ignorance. Only a theory of predestination could account for divine control of the growth of natural philosophy, which neither Priestley nor Coleridge propounded.

Ultimately it matters little to Coleridge at this time whether the miracles were deviations from the laws of nature, or simply appeared to be so. As he had written of the Design Argument in lecture three, 'the wise infer that all apparent Discord is but Harmony not understood, so if we can prove the fitness of *most* of the Events to the Annunciations the subordinate Difficulties we must necessarily refer not to the deficiency of the Annunciations, but to our limited Nature as Percipients'.[63] Consequently Coleridge's *Lectures* largely comprise an attempt to amass sufficient evidence in the balance of scales of credibility.[64]

Coleridge's strategy in his treatment of the miracles is to turn a controversial and problematic subject area into a proof. Faith is not required to accept them, as the most

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[63] *LPR*, 151. This procedure, somewhat similar to Priestley's 'general tenor' principle for discerning the meaning of a text, is especially important to Coleridge's discussion of prophecy: 'This argument is more particularly applicable to Prophecies which exist by Procession, and consequently must be obscure in proportion to the distance, and become clear as they approach the Time of their Completion'.
[64] Peter Mann notes that this was a common response by Christian apologists to Hume's argument against miracles. Cf. *LPR*, 175n.

rational conclusion to draw is that they happened. Rather than being obstructions to accepting Christianity, Coleridge makes the evidence of the miracles a preparation or foundation for faith. It is an attempt to persuade his audience to approach the Bible afresh, without the distractions of the (corrupt) interpretation of the Church. This intention is most explicitly demonstrated in lecture four, and which examines 'external evidences of Christianity'.

The lecture begins with a dramatic account of the 'most exquisite Tortures on Christians' by the emperor Nero, followed by a synopsis the accounts of Christianity by classical authors.[65] Coleridge then imagines himself 'an inhabitant of some place which had received no intelligence of Christianity, but where the Classic Authors were well known'.[66] The accounts of the classic authors present a sect that is superstitious, misanthropic, and violently persecuted; and yet 'this Sect multiplied with a rapidity to which I can find no Parallel!'[67] Coleridge concludes that the malignant accounts must be false, and 'reflecting as a man who had never heard of this Religion before, I should naturally be prepossessed in its favour, and as naturally feel a thrill of indignation' at its treatment.[68]

Coleridge then appends Priestley's 'fable of the shipwrecked mariners' to his narrative, meeting the mariners in his imaginary place.[69] They describe their understanding of Christianity, eighteen hundred years after Christ, but they are illiterate, have lost their bibles, and so hold an 'hereditary faith' passed 'from father to son in unbroken Tradition'.[70] They are able to describe the principal teachings of the religion, whilst confessing that the land from which they come does not keep to the

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[65] *LPR*, 169. Mann points out that this discussion of the 'pagan writers' is derived mostly from Gibbon and Paley (*LPR* 169n).
[66] *LPR*, 170-1.
[67] *LPR*, 171.
[68] *LPR*, 173.
[69] Priestley's version appears in his *Corruptions of Christianity* (*Rutt* v. 102).
[70] *LPR*, 174.

teachings.

The implication of the mariners' account is that despite the persecution of the sect, it had continued to grow and had become dominant nearly two thousand years later. Coleridge had pictured himself unprejudiced either for or against Christianity, so as to be in a position to judge the evidence without bias and to try to account for the fact of Christianity's existence and its phenomenal spread. On the basis of this extremely brief sketch of the history of Christianity, Coleridge asks:

> If I adopt this account will it solve all the phenomena that had so puzzled me? If I reject it will all the phenomena remain unaccountable? Should I answer to myself in the affirmative, as a rational being, I must become a Christian on the same principles that I believe the doctrine of Gravitation, and with the same confidence that I do a sum in Addition or Subtraction. (*LPR*, 176-7)

Coleridge borrows a number of other arguments in support of the authenticity of the Bible, but their force rests upon the probability judgments. The very character of Jesus, for example, is considered inexplicable without divine influence empowering him, in the third lecture. To suggest that he is an imaginary character, a 'forgery' created by the writers, is 'multiplying miracles, not excluding them'.[71] Moreover the appearance and spread of Christianity on the basis of a fictional account stretches credibility, he argues.

The methods Coleridge employs to demonstrate the truth of the Bible as evidence, clearly left his position vulnerable to advances in historical, textual, and philosophical analysis. In the context of lecturing before a sympathetic group, however, who were probably familiar with Priestley's methods, Coleridge's arguments would have been persuasive. Moreover, proof of the 'evidences' of Christianity was but a foundation for a practical reading of the Bible, to which I now turn.

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[71] *LPR*, 161. This argument may be found in Priestley's *Discourses*, p.341, and Estlin's *Evidences*, p.34.

ii. 'We Must Place a Caesar within us, and that Caesar must be Religion!'[72]

Although Coleridge dedicates a great deal of space to defending the Bible in the *Lectures*, there is very little reflection on the potential complexities of interpreting it. There is next to no discussion of the immense variety within the Bible, no analysis of its literary qualities, and rarely aesthetic responses to the texts at all. Coleridge's approach is a practical one, and his concern is primarily to relate the 'principles' of the Bible to his society. The Bible is treated as the record of God's intervention into history, through which he explains the principles of the creation, and the afterlife. It can be simplified into 'the essential beliefs and duties of Christians':[73]

> That there is one God infinitely wise, powerful and good, and that a future state of Retribution is made certain by the Resurrection of Jesus who is the Messiah—are all the *doctrines* of the Gospel. That Christians must behave towards the majority with loving kindness and submission preserving among themselves a perfect Equality is a Synopsis of its Precepts. (*LPR*, 195)

Clearly resembling Priestley's practical reading of Christianity, there is a sense of mechanism in the way the Christian system operates. The requirement to 'behave towards the *majority* with loving kindness and submission' is reminiscent of Priestley's mathematical approach to salvation described in the previous chapter. Unlike Priestley, however, Coleridge finds sanction in the gospels for 'perfect Equality' among Christians, clearly resembling the principles of the Pantisocracy (see below).

This minimal basis for being a Christian made the Church appear to be, in the phrase

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[72] *LPR*, 229.
[73] *LPR*, 195.

discussed in the first chapter, 'a gluttony of faith'.[74] Unitarianism had the potential to make the Church and its doctrinal schemes redundant, based on its certainty that the Bible may be readily understood by any who read it:[75]

> We pay Physicians to heal us because we cannot heal ourselves – we fee Lawyers to plead for us, because we do not understand the Law, but the Gospels are so obvious to the meanest Capacity that he who runs may read. He who knows his letters, may find in them everything necessary for him. [...] The Scriptures once understood, every man becomes his own Teacher. (*LPR*, 209)

He criticises the 'imposture of priests' in their mystification of the simple meaning of the Scriptures, and presumption of authority over interpretation. Indeed, his aggressive rhetoric may well have unsettled the more mature and moderate Estlin. Identifying the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches as synonyms, Coleridge writes:

> Are they not both decked with gold and precious stones? Is there not written on both their Foreheads Mystery! Do they not both SELL the Gospel – Nay, nay, they neither sell, nor is it the Gospel – they forcibly exchange Blasphemy for the first fruits, and snatching the scanty Bread from the poor Man's Mouth they cram their lying Legends down his Throat! (*LPR*, 210-11)

This forceful criticism of the Church succinctly contrasts the reduced Unitarian Christianity with 'the mysterious cookery of the Orthodox'.[76] The 'first fruits' refers to 1 Corinthians in which Paul preaches the resurrection of the dead: 'But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.'[77] This is a text discussed in Priestley's 'Discourse XI, On the Resurrection of Jesus', which

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[74] *CL* i. 20.
[75] Coleridge's Priestleian account of the history of the doctrinal corruption of the Church forms the major part of lecture five (*LPR*, 196-212).
[76] *LPR*, 207-8.
[77] 1 Cor. 15.20.

quotes the above verse as an epigraph.[78] Priestley's use of the text emphasises the promise of the resurrection to all the deserving:

> Since, therefore, we may consider it as a certain and unquestionable fact, that *Christ is risen from the dead*, we may likewise, with the apostle, consider him as *the first fruits of them that sleep*, or that his resurrection is a pledge and assurance of our own, which it is the great object of Christianity to inforce [sic]. Christ is called the *first fruits*, and these are the forerunners of a general harvest. *Afterwards*, says the apostle, *they that are Christ's, at his coming*. For Christ has only left the present scene for a time. If there be any truth in the facts, the evidence of which has now been laid before you, he will certainly come again, and that *with power and great glory*, to raise the dead, and to give unto every man according to his works. (*Discourses*, 351).

The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is of such importance to Unitarians because it is the motivational force that brings about regulation in this life. This simple mechanism for encouraging virtue is contrasted in the above extract from the *Lectures* with the 'Blasphemy' of Christ's divinity, and the 'lying legends' of its elaborate doctrinal systems.

The consequences of this reading of the Bible, however, went further than to imply the redundancy of the Church alone. As discussed in chapter one, Coleridge preached the Pantisocracy as a modern version of the community of the first Christians. In the *Lectures*, however, there is a more thorough attempt to ground the principles of the Pantisocracy in the Bible as a whole. Ronald C. Wendling has described Coleridge's partial success in reading Pantisocracy in the Old Testament:

> He [Coleridge] does his best to make the state of the Old Testament approximate his political ideal of a propertyless, democratic community where power derives from the people, kingship is an aberration, and military service is voluntary. Where Jewish practices seem thoroughly unenlightened or too closely akin to those of the contemporary Anglican Church, Coleridge seeks to show (not without strain) that they were understandable in the necessitarian scheme of things. Tithing, for example, though outmoded in the 1790s, he explains as essential to support the Levites without whose teachings the Jews could not have been protected from idolatry. Elaborate rituals like animal sacrifice and seemingly trifling observances of the law are justified as valuable

[78] *Discourses*, p.325.

> outward expressions of monotheistic dispositions that otherwise would have disappeared under the pressures of surrounding polytheisms. Even the destruction of the Canaanites, uncomfortably like the war with France, Coleridge describes as a necessary lesson against such horrors of idolatry as the sacrificing of children to Moloch. For, as he dubiously argues, the end of 'meliorating idolatrous Nations' was 'so vast and benevolent as to justify any means that were necessary to it'.[79]

Accompanying his scriptural justification for aspheterism, is an account of the growth of the 'evils' of society consequent on 'the institution of landed Property'. It is a history of civilisation from the 'early ages of the World' to the 'free Constitution of England', so short that it would have taken perhaps one minute to deliver in the lecture.[80] Unsurprisingly it is a greatly simplified analysis of the progress of error in humanity, setting personifications – Property, Man, Vice, Labour, and so on – in a drama of cause and effect. Two aspects of this history are interesting, however, the first of which is the importance of individual vice in the grander movements of history:

> From their [humanity's] undisciplined Passions as Individuals and as Communities, private Vices and Public Wars became frequent – and the influence of Kings and Chieftains increased with Despotism. Thus the jarring Interests of Individuals rendered Governments necessary and governments have operated like quack Medicines; they have produced new diseases, and only checked the old ones – and the evils which they check, they perpetuate. (*LPR*, 219)

'Government' began as the necessary consequence of 'undisciplined Passions' and individual vice, but then became the active cause of further vice and on a greater scale. 'There is scarcely a Vice which Government does not teach us', Coleridge argues, sanctifying its iniquity through the Church: 'the very officers of Religion are converted into machines of Despotism'.[81]

The second significant issue raised by Coleridge's brief history of humanity is his

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[79] Ronald C. Wendling, *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity: Experience and Authority in Religious Faith* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), pp.101-2.
[80] *LPR*, 219-20.
[81] *LPR*, 221.

acceptance of the need for government, given the current state of English society: 'I confess that while this is a commercial and manufacturing nation, some kind of Government is necessary!'.[82] It is this acceptance of the current state of society as a starting point that distinguishes Coleridge's critique of English society from his Pantisocracy.[83] Whereas Pantisocracy is predicated on establishing a society more or less from nothing, Coleridge's plan of reform for English society starts from its existing conditions, and attempts to disenfranchise rather than abolish the Ministries. The Ministries would not be brought down by a popular uprising, but would lose their significance as a small principled group living in equality would attract and absorb others:

> Universal Equality is the object of the Messiah's mission not to be procured by the tumultuous uprising of an indignant multitude but this final result of an unresisting yet deeply principled Minority, which gradually absorbing kindred minds shall at last become the whole. (*LPR*, 218)

And so although the ultimate aim is to create a Pantisocracy based on Universal Equality, it should not come about through an active process of equalization of existing property relations. This is not just a pragmatic concession to the complexity of the existing conditions in England, but is in accordance with Christ's mission: 'Our Saviour by no means authorizes an Equalization of Property'.[84] Equalization of Property is rejected by Coleridge for two reasons. Firstly it would be impractical to achieve this; more importantly, however, it is an act of selfhood to claim individual ownership: 'while I possess anything exclusively mine, the selfish Passions will have

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[82] *LPR*, 223.
[83] This distinction between two social models, one with and one without a pre-existing social order, is reminiscent of the distinction Burke made between the propriety of the American and French revolutionaries.
[84] *LPR*, 227-8

full play'.[85] Coleridge is calling for renunciation, not equalization, of Property.

The personal sacrifice that this entails should be motivated on the same basis that Christ motivated his disciples to do so:

> Jesus Christ therefore commanded his disciples to preserve a strict equality – and enforced his command by the only thing capable of giving it effect. He proved to them the certainty of an Hereafter – and by the vastness of the Future diminished the Tyranny of the Present. (*LPR*, 218)

Whereas Christ had the miracles to draw the attention of his disciples and subdue them to his mission, subsequently rationalism would prove the existence of the future state. Coleridge rejects what Priestley called a 'blind implicit faith' (see chapter two), and the principal reason the *Lectures* were delivered was to advance the process of 'examination' of the evidences of Christianity, and 'reflection' on the social and political consequences: 'if not with hereditary faith but from the effect of our examination and reflection we are really convinced of a state after Death, then and then only will Self-interest be wedded to Virtue'.[86]

The final section of the last lecture is concerned with demonstrating Christ's support for a property-less state, and suggesting that its realisation is the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. He alludes to the parables of the grain of mustard seed and the leavening of the bread, suggesting that the 'deeply principled minority' would be the literal fulfilment of these parables. The principled minority would themselves comprise individuals who have renounced property and regained individual governance over their own souls. Coleridge ends his lecture, therefore, like a sermon with an 'application' of his reading of the gospels to his congregation. He quotes from Luke 20.22-5 – 'render unto Caesar the Things that are Caesar's, and unto God

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[85] *LPR*, 228.
[86] *LPR*, 218.

the Things that are God's' – and then draws his moral from the text:

> That we use money is a proof that we possess individual property, and Commerce and Manufactures, and while these evils continue, your own vices will make a government necessary, and it is fit that you maintain that government. Emperor and King are but the lord lieutenants of conquered Souls – secondaries and vicegerents who govern not with their own right but with power delegated to them by our Avarice and appetites! Let us exert over our own hearts a virtuous despotism, and lead our own Passions in triumph, and then we shall want neither Monarch nor General. If we would have no Nero without, we must place a Caesar within us, and that Caesar must be Religion! (*LPR*, 228-9)

In the 'history of humanity' discussed above, it is the 'undisciplined passions' kindled by the attachment to Property that had led to both 'private Vices and Public Wars'.[87] Consequently 'Religion' is portrayed as a virtuous despot who should 'lead our own Passions in triumph'. Coleridge is arguing that religion enables an enlarged perspective on life (and after), and this is the enticement to persuade individuals to renounce private ownership. It is not at all clear, however, what this practically means. He does not propose any constitutional changes, offer any examples of what steps ought to be taken, and he certainly does not explore how such an idea could exist in the aggressive international political arena. Coleridge simultaneously wishes to promote Christianity as a system with profound political implications, whilst attempting to maintain that the system is apolitical. His final image of religion as 'Caesar' embodies this paradox. Caesar was a colonial ruler responsible for the financial demands on his subject country, and which Christ sets in opposition the 'things that are God's'. Caesar, by contrast with Nero, may be a 'virtuous despot', but his suitability as an image of religion rests upon Coleridge's rather clumsy rhetoric.

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[87] *LPR*, 219.

Towards the end of the final lecture, Coleridge addresses himself to 'those who acknowledge the Scriptures as their rule of Life and depend for eternal happiness on their obedience to them'.[88] This is a strange narrowing of his address, given that he intended his lectures for 'two classes of men – Christians *and* Infidels'. It could suggest that Coleridge felt that his audience would now be convinced of the truth of Christianity and so he could safely take the whole audience to his concluding application. However, it is probably more likely that it implies a partisan audience to begin with. Indeed Cottle records only one instance of dissent in the audience during the lectures, and comments that there were 'few attending Mr. C's lectures but those whose political views were similar to his own'.[89] And as I have argued above Estlin was certainly familiar with, and committed to, Priestley's religious apologetics, and this may well have encouraged Coleridge to think that he was preaching to the converted.

This supportive consensus may well have influenced the shape of the *Lectures*, and Coleridge himself looked back on this period as one in which personal insecurity manifested in a tendency to accommodate his views to those around him. In a letter to George Beaumont of 1 October 1803 Coleridge describes his remoteness from his own family, suggesting that his radical associates were a surrogate family:

> These offices of Love the Democrats only performed to me; my own family, bigots from Ignorance, remained wilfully ignorant from Bigotry. What wonder then, if in the heat of grateful affection & the unguarded Desire sympathizing with these who so kindly sympathized with me, I too often deviated from my own Principles? (*CL* ii. 1000)

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[88] *LPR*, 225.

[89] Quoted in *LPR*, xxx. Although Cottle is the main source of information concerning the delivery of the lectures he is, as one critic described, 'garrulous and unreliable'. Cf. Tom Mayberry, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Crucible of Friendship* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), p.37.

One must be cautious in reading Coleridge's assessment of his youth, as he showed an almost pathological concern to demonstrate the consistency of his principles between youth and maturity. In this case he may well have felt 'grateful affection' for his growing friendship with the Beaumonts. However Coleridge's volatile personality does have an important bearing on his religious views in the *Lectures*, and particularly significant is the contrast between his character and that of Priestley.

The first of Priestley's *Discourses* considers 'the Importance of Religion to enlarge the Mind of Man':

> By means of faith in the being and providence of God, we are nobly carried out of, and beyond, ourselves, and are led to conceive a generous regard for others; and by this we lose nothing but a mean selfishness, and with it a tormenting anxiety, which is at the same time the characteristic, and the punishment, of a narrow, contracted mind. [...] Without faith in God, and a belief of his universal benevolent providence, men must be liable to be peculiarly distressed and disconcerted at such calamitous events as we are daily subject to. They are evils in themselves, and we do not know to what farther evils they may lead. Even the good that we see is uncertain, and unstable, and for any thing that we know, may terminate in evil, which it will thereby only serve to aggravate. In this state of mind all is darkness and confusion, anxiety and dread. (*Discourses*, pp.7-8)

Priestley's certainty that religion keeps the mind free from anxiety certainly appears to have been true in his own life. His writings are always informed by a calm confidence, and there is no place for extremes of ecstasy or anxiety in them. His *Memoirs* contain just one account of his suffering anxiety, when as a child he became convinced that becoming a Christian must involve a dramatic conversion, and which he had not experienced. Looking back on this, characteristically, he found a benefit in this temporary state of unease leading him to 'more rational notions of religion':

> I imagine that even these conflicts of mind were not without their use, as they led me to think habitually of God and a future state. And though my feelings were then, no doubt, too full of terror, what remained of them was a deep reverence for divine things, and in time a pleasing satisfaction which can never be effaced, and, I hope, was strengthened as I have advanced in life, and acquired more rational notions of religion.

(*Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, p.72)

Religion was a practical defence against anxiety for Priestley and though he was personally exposed to dangerous situations, and publicly in favour of apparently calamitous political events, his rational calm was never troubled by doubt that the ultimate end of everything would be good, if not glorious.

Although he went through a series of changes in his theological position, he was totally convinced of the correctness of his rational methodology, committing himself to a life of disciplined and regular scholarship to communicate this. Hazlitt's humorous description of Priestley's central concerns, portrays a man settled in his vocation:

> To him the whole business of life consisted in *reading and writing*; and the ordinary concerns of this world were considered as frivolous or mechanical interruption to the more important interests of science and of a future state. ('The Late Dr. Priestley', p.237).

It is clear enough from the army letters discussed in chapter one ('mine is a sensibility gangrened with inward corruption'), and indeed from his generally miserable course through life, that Coleridge's mind was highly susceptible to anxiety and depression.[90] Conversely he was also given to heightened states of emotion and spontaneous joy, and his modulation of emotional states is a dramatic constituent of many of his great poems. He found the lime-tree bower a prison, for example, until imagining his friends experiencing nature as a veil for the 'Almighty Spirit'. The thought of their ecstasy awakens his heart to 'Love and Beauty'.

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[90] *CL* i. 62. Interestingly in 1806 Coleridge would tell his brother-in-law George Fricker, that his rejection of Unitarianism was the consequence of re-reading the New Testament, and his miserable inner state: 'I was for many years a Socinian; and at times almost a Naturalist, but sorrow, and ill health, and disappointment in the only deep wish I had ever cherished, foced me to look into myself; I read the New Testament again, and I became fully convinced, that Socinianism was not only not the doctrine of the New Testament, but that it scarcely deserved the name of a religion in any sense' (*CL* ii. 1189).

Their differences in temperament are an important factor in Coleridge's use of Priestley's apologetics. For although Coleridge adopted substantially the same approach to revealed religion as Priestley, the *Lectures* are dramatically different to Priestley's *Discourses*. Both foreground their emphasis on reason as a neutral and objective means of analysis, and yet they arrive at almost opposite attitudes towards atheism. Where Priestley finds unbelievers to be of value (insofar as their rejection of State Christianity he understands as advancing the cause of rationalism), Coleridge consistently attacks atheism as irrational due to its failure to give a creditable account of causation. But Coleridge goes further than simply to suggest that atheism is based on faulty reasoning; he consistently pours scorn on it, treating it as 'intellectual deformity'. It is not just the intellectual paucity of atheism that Coleridge mocks, but its selfish lack of feelings, as he sees it. He portrays the old man in the cave as cold, and pities the man whose 'petrified Heart' cannot discern the benevolence of the 'Omnipotent' in the blooming virgin, or summer evening.[91]

Both men approach nature predominantly as a site for proof of the existence of God. They understand it to demonstrate intelligent design and so serve as evidence of the Creator. Coleridge's use of the Design Argument is markedly more animated, however, appealing to its beauty as much as its structure. He is some way from asserting God's presence in nature at this stage, maintaining an empirical attitude towards knowledge of God. But his emphasis on emotional responses to nature suggests a yearning to experience God as an immanent reality rather than simply derive arguments about the attributes of a transcendent power; a yearning that manifested in his attraction to mysticism over the coming years.[92]

Coleridge's approach to the Bible is largely derived from Priestley, understanding it

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[91] *LPR*, 94.

[92] Coleridge's troubled attitude towards mysticism is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

to be an authentic history of divine revelation, describing a perfect system of morals, and information about the duties and expectations of a Christian. Both men argue that the meaning of the Bible has been corrupted by a series of political and philosophical intrusions, from which they attempt to liberate it. They insist that the Bible contains a simple meaning, and may be reduced down to very few practical principles, that may be discerned by any individual. They reach contrasting conclusions on social and political significance of the universally intelligible meaning, however. Indeed Coleridge appears to take a more overtly literal approach to his chosen texts, finding in them support for the communistic principles of the Pantisocracy.

Coleridge's literalism may be part of a more general concern to integrate his religious beliefs and his practical way of life. Priestley's drive was to accumulate sufficient evidence to prove the future state in the belief that this will motivate good morals in this life. Coleridge believed the same, but his desire to make his reading the basis of a practical lifestyle reflects an urge to embody his beliefs and not just hold them as probable explanations based on the evidence. In *Conciones*, Coleridge expresses the level of commitment to beliefs he thought essential:

> It is not enough that we have once swallowed these Truths—we must feed on them, as insects on a leaf, till the whole heart be coloured by their qualities, and shew [sic.] its food in every the minutest fibre. (*LPR*, 49) [93]

Notably Coleridge stresses that the 'heart' must become saturated with truth, suggesting a characteristic intensity of feeling in his adoption of beliefs. Indeed Coleridge suggests in the *Lectures* that the contemplation of the God can lead to a mystical union:

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[93] See also Coleridge's letter to Southey of 21 October 1794 (*CL* i. 115), in which he uses the same metaphor of the insect embodying that which it feeds on.

> In the country, the Love and Power of the great Invisible are everywhere perspicuous and by degrees we become partakers of that which we are accustomed to contemplate. (*LPR*, 224)

Such intense religious feelings could hardly find expression through Priestleian defences of Christianity. Throughout the *Lectures* Coleridge struggles to animate his arguments with strong feelings in order to inspire his audience, and which at times manifests in rhetorical excess. But despite Coleridge's attempts to charge up his performances, and his extensive discussion of the Bible, he does not succeed in preaching an especially engaging picture of religion. The Woman in White is a passive figure, who directs attention to the future state rather than the valley of life itself. Caesar is little more than a moral code by which to resist passions and appetites.

Coleridge is at his most animated when criticising the Church and State, and yet despite his vivid portraits of their corruption, his suggested course of action is decidedly quietist, as John Colmer has pointed out of the Bristol Lectures generally: 'there is an odd lack of harmony between Coleridge's cautious approach to most of the problems tackled and the intemperate language that he frequently employs'.[94]

Nevertheless Coleridge appears to have been well received as a 'powerful accession' to the cause of religion.[95] Throughout the period in which he delivered lectures in Bristol (late January-November 1795) Coleridge worked on his most ambitious poem to that point, 'Religious Musings'. In the reception of this poem, problems with rhetorical control, assumptions about the religious views of his readers, and the relationship between religion and politics, would become more apparent to Coleridge.

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[94] John Colmer, *Coleridge: Critic of Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p.27. Coleridge would dismiss his own lack of rhetorical restraint during this period, in a letter to George Beaumont in October 1803. He writes that nothing would 'have deterred me from a strong Phrase or striking Metaphor, altho' I had had no other inducement to the use of the same except the wantonness of luxuriant Imagination.' (*CL* ii. 1001-2)

[95] Cottle's account, quoted above.

4

Miscellaneous Musings

'Religious Musings' & *The Watchman*

The importance of 'Religious Musings' to Coleridge's poetic development is enormous. Initially he considered it the work on which to 'rest for all my poetic credit';[1] subsequently it was the embodiment of a tendency to burden his poetry with 'a general turgidness of diction', and thoughts that 'demand a degree of attention unsuitable to the nature and objects of poetry'.[2] Hence the poem was important to Coleridge initially as a representation of his potential, and subsequently as a warning against using poetry as a vehicle for metaphysical dogma.

Nearly a quarter of the poem was published on March 9, 1796 in Coleridge's new project *The Watchman*, under the title 'The Present State of Society'. *The Watchman* was an attempt to disseminate political news and encourage the widespread understanding of political principles. He presented the project, however, as having a religious purpose, through which he could preach the 'Truth' and set everybody 'Free'.[3] And to promote the journal he undertook a 'month-long tour to the centres of radicalism and dissent in the Midlands and North of England, on a journey of around 400 miles'.[4] He preached as he went, successfully raising subscriptions, and quoting extracts from 'Religious Musings' to inspire his sermons with poetry and prophecy.

Coleridge presented these ambitious activities in dramatic terms in his poem

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[1] *CL* i. 197. References to 'Religious Musings' are from *1796*.
[2] *BL* i. 6-7).
[3] *TW*, 9.
[4] Cf. Nicholas Roe, 'Coleridge's Watchman Tour', *CB*, n.s. 21 (2003), 35-46 (p.40). Hereafter *Watchman Tour*.

'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement':

> I therefore go, and join head, heart, and hand,
> Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight
> Of science, freedom, and the truth in Christ. (ll.60-2, *Keach*)

The resolution in this declaration is total; he is the Christian soldier unified in purpose and certain of his duty. This singularity would be tested and worn down, however, as the sheer workload strained Coleridge mental and physical health, and as the mixed responses of his audiences indicated that the socio-political context was more complicated than imagined.

These tensions manifest in the work he produced at this time. 'Religious Musings', for example, addresses more or less all of the religious and political themes of the previous year's lecturing, and yet the very title – 'Religious *Musings*' – suggests a casual and meditative rather 'active and firm' approach to these issues. The sub-title, 'a desultory poem', adds to the sense of it being a shifting and unmethodical work. Similarly *The Watchman* is a patchwork of articles joined under the description 'a miscellany' which is, as Roe has suggested, somewhat at odds with the bold intentions Coleridge had for the journal: 'the notion of a "miscellany", sometimes associated with "muddle" and "deformity", seems at odds with the singular purpose Coleridge had undertaken'.[5] In the second number of *The Watchman*, Coleridge notes that 'The Present State of Society' is an extract from 'Religious Musings' found in his volume *Poems by S.T. Coleridge*. This indicates that only five weeks before publication, Coleridge had not decided on the title for his volume of poetry, and would finally settle on the rather desultory title *Poems on Various Subjects*.

In this chapter I will argue that these formal characteristics are essentially related to

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[5] *Watchman Tour*, p.41.

this transitional stage in Coleridge's career. The work from this period suggests that Coleridge attempted to present his religious and political views as systematic, even whilst profound uncertainties were undermining this. The chapter centres on 'Religious Musings', and is in three parts. The first examines in detail Coleridge's hopes for *The Watchman*, and considers its significance as a context for the publication of the extract from 'Religious Musings'. I argue that the political nature of the surrounding material encourages an understanding of the millennial section as a literal application of the biblical prophecies to the contemporary state of Europe. The second section explores Coleridge's representation of Christ in 'Religious Musings', and argues that the very difficult portraits of Christ in the gospels and in Revelation lead to inconsistencies in Coleridge's application of the 'system of Christ' to politics. The final section considers the reception of both 'Religious Musings' and *The Watchman*, arguing that it made Coleridge aware of the problematic assumptions he made of his audience, and their religious outlook. Moreover he began to doubt the suitability of poetry as a medium for expressing his politically-charged religious views.

i. 'The Truth May Make Us Free'[6]

Coleridge describes the origins of the plan for *The Watchman* in the *Biographia*:

> I was persuaded by sundry Philanthropists and Anti-polemists to set on foot a periodical work, entitled *The Watchman*, that (according to the general motto of the work) *all might know the truth, and that the truth might make us free*! In order to exempt it from the stamp-tax, and likewise to contribute as little as possible to the supposed guilt of a war against freedom, it was to be published on every eighth day, thirty-two pages, large octavo, closely printed, and price only FOUR-PENCE. Accordingly with a flaming prospectus, '*Knowledge is Power*,' &c. *to cry the state of the political atmosphere*. (*BL* i. 179)

[6] *TW*, 9.

The account in the *Biographia* is an entertaining one, but it is difficult to be certain of the accuracy of his description of the genesis and eventual collapse of the project. He portrays himself as more or less passive to the influence of those around him, not only claiming that he was 'persuaded' to begin it, but that some he met with on his subscription tour advised him 'that the employment was neither fit for me, nor I fit for the employment'.[7] This opinion was in response to Coleridge's ironic comment, 'I am far from convinced, that a Christian is permitted to read either newspapers or any other works of merely political and temporary interest'.[8] It is impossible to tell whether this is a reliable recollection (there is no mention of the anecdote in his fairly detailed letters to Josiah Wade writing at the time), but the ambivalence towards politics is in keeping with Coleridge in 1796.

Coleridge's decision to become a 'Watchman' was a significant but troubled step towards engaging with politics in the society that he no longer intended to leave. His Bristol lectures, taken as a whole, are a mixture of attention to particular issues – the slave trade, the war with France, or the 'Two Bills' – and a more general tendency to preach religion as an alternative politics. *The Watchman*, however, is a more thoroughgoing attempt to set politics within a religious framework; at least Coleridge intended it to be.

A range of sources have been proposed as contributing to Coleridge's choice of title, both biblical and contemporary, and Ian Wylie has shown how both sources combine to make *The Watchman* a millennial title: [9]

> In a farewell address to his Dissenting congregation at Hackney in April 1794, Priestley took as his theme the signs that would warn mankind of the approaching millennium.

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[7] *BL* i. 184.
[8] *BL* i. 183.
[9] For the origins of the title, see *TW*, xxix, and, *Watchman Tour*, p.36.

> Reminding his listeners that Christ had told men to be 'on the watch' for the new age, Priestley described the moral and natural upheavals that were to occur in the final epoch of the world. 'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour' is the warning at the end of Christ's parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.[10]

The ten numbers were each published with a motto adapted from the gospel of John, conveying Coleridge's ambitions for the journal: 'That all may know the TRUTH; | And that the TRUTH may make us FREE!!'.[11] There is perhaps unintended irony in this quote. Taken from the eighth chapter, it begins with Jesus convicting the 'scribes and Pharisees' by their own consciences, and refusing to condemn the woman taken in adultery. He then teaches his followers to seek the pleasure of the Lord in all their ways, as their souls are in bondage to their sins: 'If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'. Jesus must then correct his followers who misunderstand the nature of the liberty he was talking of:

> They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. (John 8. 33-4).

In *The Watchman*, however, Coleridge does not speak of the individual struggling with his conscience, but of the need for the individual to acquire political knowledge. Sin is presented as a response to unfair systems of politics, and so knowledge of political affairs was essential in order to reform government:

> A PEOPLE ARE FREE IN PROPORTION AS THEY FORM THEIR OWN OPINIONS. In the strictest sense of the word KNOWLEDGE IS POWER. Without previous illumination a change in the *forms* of Government will be of no avail. These are but the shadows, the virtue and rationality of the People at large are the substance, of Freedom. [...] In the present perilous state of our Constitution the Friends of Freedom, of Reason,

[10] Ian Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.26. Hereafter *Coleridge and the Philosophers*.
[11] *TW*, 3.

> and of Human Nature, must feel it their duty by every mean in their power to supply or circulate political information. (*TW*, 4-5)

Wylie relates this extract to Priestley's *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768), in which he also quotes Bacon's adage 'knowledge is power'. The knowledge that Priestley promotes, however, is natural philosophy, the growth of which he understood to have revolutionary consequences:

> In this state of things, it requires but a few years to comprehend the whole preceding progress of any one art or science. [...] *Knowledge*, as Lord Bacon observes, being *power*, the human powers will, in fact, be enlarged; nature, including both its materials and its laws, will be more at our command; men will make their situation in this world abundantly more easy and comfortable; they will probably prolong their existence in it, and will grow daily more happy, each in himself, and more able (and, I believe, more disposed) to communicate happiness to others. Thus whatever was the beginning of this world, the end will be glorious and *paradisiacal*, beyond what our imaginations can now conceive.[12]

Wylie also argues that 'many became confident that a state of perfect knowledge of the natural world would be achieved within a few decades.'[13]

In *Conciones ad Populum*, published in December 1795 (the same month in which *The Watchman* was conceived), Coleridge sets out the relationship between knowledge and truth, as he understands it: 'The happiness of Mankind is the *end* of Virtue, and Truth is the Knowledge of the *means*'.[14] Clearly this is a broadly encompassing definition of Truth, and in *The Watchman* it would enable Coleridge to see his miscellaneous collection of materials as united under the motto 'that all may know the truth'. By spreading political news, interspersed with analysis, he hoped to advance the cause of liberty, promoting political principles:

> I declare my intention of relating facts simply and nakedly, without epithet or comments.

[12] *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.66.
[13] *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.66.
[14] *LPR*, 45-6.

> [...] It would be absurd to promise an equal neutrality in the political Essays. My bias, however, is in favour of principles, not men. (*TW*, 14)

Coleridge is careful to place himself above party politics, insisting that his intention is to promote examination rather than factional allegiances. 'Man begins to be free when he begins to examine', he argues, adding that it is of comparative insignificance which party is adopted: 'Men always serve the cause of freedom by *thinking*'.[15]

Coleridge's certainty, however, that the dissemination of knowledge would lead to political liberty, sometimes leads him to concoct unintentionally humorous scenarios in support of his cause. He suggests, for example, that the government tax on newspapers stops the 'children of this world' from purchasing newspapers, through which they could understand the principals of government (and in turn their rights). The tax could not stop them from *reading* newspapers, however, but they would be obliged to put themselves in the perilous environment of the 'Ale-house':

> The poor man's curiosity remains unabated with respect to events in which, above all others, he is most deeply interested; and, as by the enormous expense he is precluded from having a weekly newspaper at his home, he flies to the Ale-house for the perusal. There he contracts habits of drunkenness and sloth. (*TW*, 11)

This apparent aversion to ale brings out faint praise for the abstemious discipline of Methodism. Coleridge even suggests that liberty might have a similarly intoxicating effect on the 'lower classes', could they be persuaded to stop drinking and start reading politics:

> However absurd their enthusiasm may be, yet if Methodism produce sobriety and domestic habits among the lower classes, it makes them susceptible of liberty; and this very enthusiasm does perhaps supersede the use of spiritous liquors, and bring on the same pleasing tumult of the brain without injuring the health or exhausting the wages. (*TW*, 13)

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[15] *TW*, 13.

Coleridge is straining here to convince of the edifying effects of a passion for liberty, but his general intentions in *The Watchman* are worthy: 'the diffusion of that general knowledge which should be the basis or substratum of politics'.[16]

Although substantial parts of *The Watchman* comprise political speeches and reports taken from the London press, Coleridge wildly misrepresents his voice in his own material: 'I trust, however, that I shall write what I believe to be the Truth in a spirit of meekness'.[17] This misrepresentation of tone is nowhere more clear than in the second number in which the extract from 'Religious Musings' first appeared. Nearly a hundred lines of the poem are printed under the title 'The Present State of Society', clearly echoing Priestley's fast sermon of February 1794, *The Present State of Europe*.[18] Indeed the second *Watchman* itself appeared on a fast day, March 9 1796.[19]

Fast days allowed the nation to repent of its sins, but for Coleridge and most dissenters, it was an empty pageant in which the public's favour rather than God's, was to be enlisted for unworthy causes. Coleridge had derided them in *Conciones* four months earlier:

> If they, who mingled the cup of bitterness, drank its contents, we might look with a calm compassion on the wickedness of great Men. But alas! the storm which they raise, falls heaviest on the unprotected Innocent: and the Cottage of the poor Man is stripped of every Comfort, before the Oppressors, who send forth the mandate of Death, are amerced in one Luxury or one Vice. If a series of calamities succeed each, they deprecate the anger of Heaven by a FAST! (*LPR*, 65-6)

Coleridge began the second number with his infamous 'Essay on Fasts', and though it is full of the indignation of the extract above, it is written in an altogether more lively

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[16] *TW*, 14.
[17] *TW*, 14.
[18] Jonathan Wordsworth considers Priestley's sermon to be 'the basis of Coleridge's statement of faith in 'Religious Musings' (*Present State of Europe*, p.iii).
[19] On fast days see *Unitarian Radicalism*, pp.64-72; and Roland Bartel, 'The Story of Public Fast Days in England', *Anglican Theological Review*, 37 (1955), 190-200.

spirit however.[20] The epigraph to the Essay is from Isaiah: 'wherefore my Bowels shall sound like an Harp'. In its biblical context, the prophet laments from his innermost being ('bowels') the coming destruction of Moab, but in the 'Essay', it clearly appears to be an irreverent scatological protest against fast-days.[21] This playfulness ran throughout most of the article, but perhaps the following extract was the most offensive to his readership, written in a tone more reminiscent of Thomas Paine than a Christian apologist:

> It was the policy of the early Christians to assimilate their religion to that of the Heathens in all possible respects. The ceremonies of the Romish church have been traced to this source by Middleton; the miraculous conception is a palpable imitation of the story of Romulus, the son of a vestal virgin, by the descent of a Deity; and so, I suppose, because Pythagoras fasted forty days, the Interpolators of the Gospels must needs palm the same useless prodigy on Jesus. (*TW*, 52)

Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), had been accused of 'covert infidelity' for his *Letter from Rome, Shewing an Exact Conformity Between Popery and Paganism* (1729), and his contribution to the debates on miracles eclipsed even those of David Hume.[22] For Coleridge, Middleton's findings were as true of the Church of England as of the Roman Church. However, although Coleridge's principal target is the Church, in this extract he is criticising the gospel writers, in a dismissive tone; he was liable to upset the Dissenters as much as the Orthodoxy.

Soon after the second number was published Coleridge expressed regret at writing the Essay, attempting to justify himself to the Rev. John Edwards, on account of the

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[20] Lewis Patton has observed that the 'Essay on Fasts', 'discloses an aspect of Coleridge's nature usually hidden; we see a bold, gay, satirical person who must have been well known to his friends, but whom we as his readers seldom meet' (*TW*, xliii). Coleridge certainly kept this side hidden in 'Religious Musings'.

[21] Coleridge seemed to enjoy the pun however, writing to Poole in November 1796: 'David Hartley is well, saving that he is sometimes inspired by the God Eolus, & like Isaiah, his "bowels, sound like an Harp"!' (*CL* i. 251).

[22] *DNB*, xii. 345-7.

haste required to produce the journal.[23] He conceded however that 'what so many men wiser and better than myself think a solemn subject ought not to have been treated ludicrously'.[24] A few weeks later, Coleridge told Poole, 'the Essay on Fasts I am ashamed of: it was conceived in the spirit, & clothed in the harsh scoffing, of an Infidel'.[25]

Despite his regrets regarding the tone of the piece, Coleridge was serious in his criticism of fast-days, his objections being threefold. Firstly the purpose in fasting was presented as an opportunity for the nation to join in a penitential recognition of sin. But Coleridge considered the chief sins of the nation to be committed by its leaders, and the people sinned primarily in response to the conditions forced upon it by the powerful and the wealthy. He sarcastically accepts that 'the poor and labouring classes [...] have brought down the Judgement of Heaven on the nation', because the alternative view would be seditious:

> If our public calamities were to be attributed to the wickedness of the rich and powerful, it would more than insinuate doubts of the incorruptness of our House of Commons, and the justice and the necessity of the present war – for by the rich and powerful chiefly was the present war begun and supported, and in every country, directly or indirectly, the rich and powerful hold the reins of Government. (*TW*, 54)

The second attack Coleridge makes on the fast is more straightforward. The poor are in a sense involuntarily fasting on account of the scarcity of food relative to that consumed by the wealthy. Thirdly, Coleridge makes a Scriptural defence of his position, ending with a sincere protest for the plight of the people, more respectfully

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[23] John Edwards took over from Priestley at the New Meeting in Birmingham in 1791, where he ministered until his death in 1802.
[24] *CL* i. 191.
[25] *CL* i. 202. Just over ten years later, Coleridge would cite the Essay as a rare example of his tending 'towards irreligion' (*Friend* i. 26). Twenty years after the Essay, in the *Biographia*, Coleridge wrote that it had 'a most censurable application of a text from Isaiah for its motto, [and which] lost me near five hundred of my subscribers at one blow' (*BL* i. 184).

adapted from Isaiah:[26]

> Wilt thou call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? This is the Fast that I have chosen, *to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burthens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke:* to deal thy bread to the hungry, to bring the unhoused poor to thy table, and when thou seest the naked that thou cover him. (*TW*, 55)

Fasting was not the only sacrifice the people had to make of course. They were responsible for funding the war also, and it is the cost of the war, and the management of the nation's finances that Coleridge addresses in the following article, 'The Loan'.

Again Coleridge begins in scatological mood: 'In the present state of our nature we do not expect, or indeed wish, that the whole of each parliamentary harangue should consist of pure and defecated reasoning'.[27] Coleridge's account of the circumstances of the loan insinuates that the government and the lender (a banker named Walter Boyd), colluded in order to generate an excessive profit from the loan. The loan was necessitated by the immense cost of the war with France, and the profits made from the loan would be funded by the public purse. Hence, great numbers of people from the nation were being both sent to war as well paying for it.

It is in this context of the manipulation and exploitation of the nation by both Church and State, that 'The Present State of Society' appears:

> Ah! far remov'd [from] all that glads the sense,
> From all that softens or ennobles man,
> The wretched Many! Bent beneath their loads
> They gape at PAGEANT POWER, nor recognize
> Their Cot's transmuted plunder! From the tree
> Of Knowledge, ere the vernal sap had risen,
> Rudely disbranch'd. O *blest* Society![28]

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[26] Isaiah 1.15 & 58.4-7 (altered).
[27] *TW*, 55.
[28] Extracts from 'The Present State of Society' may be found in *TW*, 64-7.

The playfulness has gone, replaced by the embittered sarcasm of '*blest* Society!' The 'wretched Many', deceived of their unalienable birthright, support the wealthy in their wealth, and being kept in ignorance, are unable to see the cost exacted from them. Church and State in their pomp and finery, accused in the preceding articles, made rich on the backs of the poor, deceive in a cruel 'pageant' enacted in the nation's churches and in parliament.

Coleridge goes on to allegorise the present state of society, drawing on two popular and contemporary works:

> O *blest* Society!
> Fitliest depictur'd by some sun-scorch'd waste,
> Where oft majestic thro' the tainted noon
> The SIMOOM sails, before whose purple pomp
> Who falls not prostrate dies: and where, at night,
> Fast by each precious fountain on green herbs
> The LION couches; or HYÆNA dips
> Deep in the lucid stream his bloody jaws;
> Or SERPENT plants his vast moon-glittering bulk,
> Caught in whose monstrous twine BEHEMOTH yells,
> His bones loud-crashing.

Coleridge appends a footnote to explain that the scene is taken from James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* which was very popular at the time,[29] and the same extract upon which the above is based, had already been adapted for poetical use by Erasmus Darwin in 'the decade's most popular poem', *The Botanic Garden* (1791).[30] Although Coleridge had met with Darwin on his Watchman Tour, he liked neither his views nor his poetry.[31] He was later to describe Darwin's poetry as

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[29] 'There was one book of the day which everybody who read at all was reading – Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile.* It had been the topic of discussion in April, 1794, in Coleridge's circle at Cambridge.' John Livingstone Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (London: Picador, 1927; repr. 1978), p.123.

[30] *Politics of Romantic Poetry*, p.29.

[31] 'Dr. Darwin, the everything, except the Christian', Coleridge wrote in January 1796, after disagreeable arguments with him regarding the evidences of religion (*CL* i. 177). See also Coleridge's letter to Thelwall of May 1796. Referring to *The Botanic Garden* he wrote, 'I absolutely nauseate Darwin's Poem' (*CL* i. 216).

'thoughts *translated* into the language of poetry',[32] but *The Botanic Garden* has long been recognised as important source for parts of 'Religious Musings', and the same accusation has been fairly made of parts of Coleridge's poem.[33]

Wylie translates the allegory as follows:

> Coleridge used the passage of the poisonous Simoom to describe the passing of the purple-pomped Monarch. The king's existence in society, like the Simoom in nature, depends on imbalance and inequality in the world, and both bring only destruction in their passage. [...] 'The Simoom is here introduced as emblematical of the pomp & powers of Despotism' Coleridge added in 1797. (*Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.74)

Wylie also reads the passage as 'an allegory of the event that had caused all the trouble and so changed the political climate of the country, the attack on George III four months earlier.'[34] It was this attack that had lead to the 'gagging bills'.[35]

Despite these literary and historical contemporary resonances Charles Lamb, usually a very sympathetic reader of Coleridge's poetry, singled out parts of this passage for particular and amusing criticism. Lamb had written to Coleridge having read 'The Present State of Society' (though not having read 'Religious Musings' in its entirety), and thought it 'noble' but 'elaborate'.[36] But on re-reading the poem in a more sympathetic mood he focused on what he saw as the offending section:

> If there be any thing in it approaching to tumidity (which I meant not to infer in elaborate: I meant simply labord [sic.]) it is the Gigantic hyperbole by which you describe the Evils of existing society. Snakes, Lions, hyenas and behemoths, is carrying your resentment beyond bounds. (*LL* i. 8-9)

Despite the partial retraction – and indeed a month later Lamb had utterly submitted

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[32] *BL* i. 19.
[33] Cf. *Road to Xanadu*, pp.87-92; H. W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: Athlone, 1962) p.89; & *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, pp.73ff.
[34] *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.112.
[35] Cf. *LPR*, 257-76.
[36] *LL* i. 1.

himself[37] – Lamb's first response gave Coleridge a foretaste of the mixed reaction to 'Religious Musings' he would receive. In this passage Coleridge has attempted to allegorise both a particular event (the attack on the king) and the general suffering of the people; but his concern to vocalise the plight of the poor and criticise exploitation by Church and State, is submerged in an allegory which tends to draw attention to itself rather than its tenor. The odd combination of animals is a distraction from the Coleridge's plea for the state of society, and his footnote on the Behemoth – 'used poetically for a very large quadruped; but in general it designates the Elephant' – does little to help.

Coleridge reins in his rhetorical exuberance a little when he focuses on particulars rather than general views of society. He turns from 'PAGEANT POWER' to describe the wasting effects of poverty and the French war, on the communities of England:

> O thou poor Wretch,
> Who nurs'd in darkness and made wild by want
> Roamest for prey, yea thy unnatural hand
> Dar'st lift to deeds of blood! O pale-eyed Form!
> The Victim of Seduction, doom'd to know
> Polluted nights and days of blasphemy;
> Who in loath'd orgies with lewd Wassailers
> Must gaily laugh, while thy remember'd home
> Gnaws, like a Viper, at thy secret heart.

Though the wild animals are gone, Coleridge still treats the scene almost as the enactment of the process of the influence of corruption. The soldier has no name, but is the 'pale-eyed Form', who is driven to unnatural acts, 'loath'd orgies', and false laughter. Coleridge had addressed the same issue in *Conciones*, but in that he combines a general reflection on the causes of the present war, with a specific image of the exploitation of the starving:

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[37] 'I dare not *criticise* the Relig[ious] Musings, I like not to *select* any part where all is excellent' (*LL* i. 16).

> In former wars the victims of Ambition had crowded to the standard from the influence of national Antipathies; but this powerful stimulant has been so unceasingly applied, as to have well nigh produced an exhaustion. What remains? Hunger. Over a recruiting place in this city [Bristol] I have seen pieces of Beef hung up to attract the half-famished Mechanic. (*LPR*, 69)

Treating these subjects in 'Religious Musings', Coleridge tends to make them remote by burying them in unnecessarily awkward syntax, and dramatic abstraction. In the succeeding lines, for example, he creates an affecting scene describing the tormented grief of a family that loses its father to the war, but Coleridge keeps the imagery in a gothic register:

> O wretched Widow who in dreams dost view
> Thy Husband's mangled corse – and from the short doze
> Start'st with a shriek! or in thy half thatch'd cot,
> Wak'd by the wintry night-storm, wet and cold,
> Cow'rst o'er thy screaming baby!

There is an apparent relish in the imagery – aged women dying slowing through starvation, distraught widows, mangled corpses, and screaming babies – which does not sit easily with the stark sentiment he is conveying. It is, however, a more localised observation on the effects of the war, though still some way from the plain and affecting language of Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads*.

Seamus Perry has described this tendency to allegorise particular human experiences is the result of Coleridge's 'penchant for the ideal':

> It is Coleridge's visionary penchant for the ideal that gives 'Religious Musings' its heaving cast of capitalised abstractions and rousing stereotypes, all serving to dragoon diverse and particular human experience into the general cases of allegory.[38]

[38] Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge's Millennial Embarrassments', *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (2000), 1-22 (7).

This 'penchant' probably attracted Coleridge to the book of Revelation, with its host of personifications, symbols, and allegorised events. Revelation is the basis of the last section of 'The Present State of Society', as contemporary events are put in the context of Christ's Second Coming, and the renewal of heaven and earth:

> Rest awhile,
> Children of Wretchedness! More groans must rise,
> More blood must stream, or ere your wrongs be full.
> Yet is the day of Retribution nigh:
> The Lamb of God hath open'd the fifth seal:
> And upward rush on swiftest wing of fire
> Th'innumerable multitude of Wrongs
> By man on man inflicted! Rest awhile,
> Children of Wretchedness! The hour is nigh.

With the fifth seal being opened, the first four seals have already been opened – the horsemen of the apocalypse are already at large. Hence, conquest, war, famine, and death are already spreading across the earth. And if his readers had not managed to read this as an application to the contemporary state of Europe, a footnote added to a line in *1796* links this section to the French Revolution. The demise is then prophesied of 'the Great, the Rich, the Mighty men | The Kings and the Chief Captains of the World', followed by the destruction of the whore of Babylon.

Kelvin Everest has justifiably argued that 'the passage would probably have given scant comfort to any child of wretchedness who happened across it, its effect deriving entirely from a generalised optimism.'[39] The poor, Coleridge suggests, should leave their future in the hands of God, though Providence will be assisted by such virtuous projects as *The Watchman*. As will be clear from the previous chapter, the poor should not attempt to change things for themselves, but 'rest awhile'.[40]

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[39] *Secret Ministry*, pp.30-1.

[40] Jon Mee discusses Coleridge's paternalistic attitude towards the poor: 'Coleridge deems the poor too transient in their passions to regulate themselves'. See Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and*

Clearly, in the context of the images of the wretched that Coleridge has rendered up to this point in the poem – the 'lewd wassailers', 'wretched Widow', not to mention the snakes, lions, and elephants – the instruction to 'rest awhile' is little short of feeble. Moreover the agrarian paradise Coleridge's projects, once the powers of the world have been removed and destroyed, may well not have appealed to the wretched:

> Return, pure FAITH! return, meek PIETY!
> The kingdoms of the World are yours: each heart
> Self-govern'd, the vast Family of Love,
> Rais'd from the common earth by common toil,
> Enjoy the equal produce.

This is perhaps an unappealing vision in a severely cold year, in which 'common toil' did not bring sufficient produce from the 'common earth'.[41] Similarly the suggestion that self-government is the way forward – the climactic conclusion to the *Lectures* of 1795 – somewhat undercuts the horrific images of the lives of the wretched, presented as being the victims of such uncompromising forces as hunger and war.

'The Present State of Society' is, to say the least, a miscellaneous contribution to *The Watchman*. Its position, following severe criticisms of the Church and State, is a context that strongly encourages a literal application of the millennial section to society. *The Watchman* represents an attempt to contribute to the gradual spread of political principles, which is hardly likely to engender a rapid transformation in the fortunes of the poor. In the *Lectures*, Coleridge had described the spread of universal equality as a process '*gradually* absorbing kindred minds [that] shall *at last* become the whole' [my italics].[42] And in the 'Introductory Essay' with which the first number of *The Watchman* begins, Coleridge almost welcomes the gagging bills as they may

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Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.141ff.

[41] On the harsh agricultural conditions 1795-6, cf. *TW*, xxix.

[42] *LPR*, 218.

'render the language of political publications more cool and guarded'.[43]

Consequently Coleridge could not promise the sort of rapid changes that had occurred in France, and that radical groups in England were calling for. He is able to announce his miscellany as the harbinger of liberty with great promise, and is able to depict the present state of society with passionate intensity, even in spite of the distraction of his rhetorical indulgence. As with the Pantisocracy and the growth of the 'deeply principled minority', however, the means of arriving at the ultimate universal happiness he prophesies, is gradual and undramatic. He can offer little to the 'wretched' in the short term, and so his projected means of transforming society is difficult to promote with a fiery spirit of promised liberation. The appeal of the millennial process to Coleridge, therefore, appears to be its role as a dramatic and paradisal denouement to slow process of reform he preached.[44]

When Coleridge came to publish 'Religious Musings' in its entirety five weeks later, the political implications of 'The Present State of Society' are quite altered by its new context. What also emerge in the full version of the poem are problems regarding Coleridge's depiction of Christ. In 'The Present State of Society' Christ is the Lamb of God, opening the seals and unleashing death and disease across the face of the earth. The predominant image of Christ in 'Religious Musings', however, is that of a pacifistic man who has been misappropriated to support the war with France. These issues come into focus by considering the poem in the context of its publication in his first volume of poetry, as well as the lengthy process of composition started some fifteen months earlier.

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[43] *TW*, 14.

[44] Roe has also commented on the inevitable problem of predicating political hopes on the coming millennium: 'To what extent was it possible for Coleridge, in "a periodical work", to continue, every eight days, denouncing the oppressiveness of the political atmosphere and, as regularly, promising a millenarian 'morning' that hadn't dawned in the preceding week and showed no signs of doing so in the next?' (*Watchman Tour*, p.42).

ii. 'Poetic Pretentions'[45]

Coleridge's first collection of poetry comprised 'poems on various subjects written at different times and prompted by very different feelings.'[46] True to this, the collection contained poetry written over a period of eight years. The earliest poem 'Effusion 18, to the Autumnal Moon' dates from 1788, and the last completed poem 'Religious Musings', was according to Joseph Cottle still being written as the rest of the volume was being printed.[47] The genres attempted include monody, epitaph, epistle, and ballad, though the greater part of the collection is comprised of 'effusions', many of which are sonnets. The subject matter and tone of the poems are greatly varied, ranging from a jocular apology to his wife Sara for his late return from a walk ('Effusion 24'), an 'Epitaph on an Infant', and eleven of the twelve 'Sonnets on Eminent Characters' that had been published in the *Morning Chronicle* during December 1794 and January 1795. Four of the poems are written by Charles Lamb and one is signed 'Sara', though she was later to admit that she 'wrote but little' of this poem.[48]

The volume is divided into four sections: the first is untitled, comprising nine poems, most significant of which, the 'Monody to Chatterton', opened the volume; the second entitled 'Effusions' consists of thirty-six sonnets and short poems; the third section is a collection of five poems entitled 'Poetic Epistles'; and the final section is 'Religious Musings'. The latter three sections are each preceded by short quotations which in the cases of the 'Effusions' and the 'Poetic Epistles' are self-deprecating

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[45] sic. *CL* i. 205.
[46] Preface, p.v, *1796*.
[47] *Keach*, p.473.
[48] *Keach*, p. 463.

apologies for what is to follow. The final section 'Religious Musings', however, is divided from the preceding poetry by an earnest declaration, taken from Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination*:

> What tho' first,
> In years unseason'd, I attun'd the Lay
> To idle Passion and unreal Woe?
> Yet serious Truth her empire o'er my song
> Hath now asserted: Falsehood's evil brood,
> Vice and deceitful Pleasure, She at once
> Excluded, and my Fancy's careless toil
> Drew to the better cause! (*1796*, p.136)

The positioning of the Akenside epigraph implies that all of the previous poems in the collection have been relegated, as products of 'idle passion and unreal woe'. Coleridge's poetic credit rested on a poem that, in less than four hundred and fifty lines, would encompass nearly of the themes of his religious and political lectures delivered whilst composing the poem. Robert S. Barth, has summarised this range:

> ['Religious Musings' is] a kind of epitome of his religious and social thinking during the Unitarian years. It all seems to be there: the deep sympathy with the French Revolution; optimism for the victory of social justice; ultimate beatitude for all men; and trust in the loving example of Jesus. As always, Coleridge's religion necessarily involved political and social consequences.[49]

Coleridge does not attempt to hide the pre-meditated structuring of the poem, by which he organised such a quantity of material. Indicating the epic grandeur attempted in the poem, he appended a thirteen part 'argument' outlining its episodic construction:

> Introduction. Person of Christ. His Prayer on the Cross. The process of his Doctrines on the mind of the Individual. Character of the Elect. Superstition. Digression to the

[49] Robert J. Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969; repr.1987), p.8.

> present War. Origin and Uses of Government and Property. The present State of Society. French Revolution. Millennium. Universal Redemption. Conclusion. (*1796*, p.137)

Despite Coleridge's foregrounding of this carefully planned design, the details of composition printed under the title, suggest a more spontaneous genesis: 'a desultory poem, written on Christmas Eve, in the year of our Lord, 1794'. By situating the composition on this symbolic night, and further by describing the poem as 'musings' and 'desultory', one might expect something of the subtle tonal control and intimate address of the Conversation Poems. However, the speaker is not developed as a unified and single consciousness responding to his surroundings, or drifting with apparent spontaneity from thought to thought. Rather the sections are thematically related to one another, following the premeditated 'argument'. Christ's 'Prayer on the Cross', for example, exemplifies the perfect unity of man, and the following section ('The process of his Doctrines on the mind of the Individual') describes the mechanism by which a spirit may break free from its 'spell' of individuality and attain this unity. Collectively the individual spirits form an 'Elect' (hence, the next section is the 'Character of the Elect') who may then guide society to recognise the spells that keep it from seeing its unity; the following section is, therefore, 'Superstition'. And so the pattern goes, with recurring themes and imagery relating the sections to one another, deepening the significance of each, whilst making them into a kind of whole. The underlying systems that govern these patterns are variously supported and explained by six pages of notes containing references to the Bible, philosophy, current affairs, and so forth.

By making the Argument the unifying principle of the poem, rather than through a constant speaker, or narrative, the poem contains what Max F. Schulz has called a

'patchwork of voices'.[50] The voices include that of a devoted worshipper ('The voice of Adoration my thrill'd heart | Rouses!' (ll.3-4)); an Old Testament prophet ('I will raise up a mourning, O ye Fiends! | And curse your spells, that film the eye of Faith' (ll.162-3)); a Christian radical ('Thee to defend, dear Saviour of Mankind [...] From all sides rush the thirsty brood of war!' (ll.188-90)); a disciple of Priestley (From Luxury and War | Sprang heavenly Science: and from Science Freedom.' (ll.243-4)); or a Gothic writer ('O ye to scepter'd Glory's gore-drench'd field | Forc'd or ensnar'd, who swept by Slaughter's scythe | (Stern nurse of Vultures!) steam in putrid heaps!' (ll.313-5)).

These voices do, perhaps, have one tendency in common, which Thomas McFarland has humorously described as the 'hysterical sublime'. He identifies Milton and Gray as the dominant influences on Coleridge's style in 'Religious Musings', and suggests that criticisms of Gray's odic voice are apposite to Coleridge's voice in the poem:

> In terms of the historical background of predecessors styles [...] we may see the hysterical sublime as an overlaying of the Miltonic model by the bardic style of Gray. [...] As Dr Johnson severely said of Gray's odes, for which that style was developed: 'These odes are marked by glittering accumulations of ungraceful ornaments; they strike, rather than please; the images are magnified by affectation; the language is laboured into harshness. The mind of the writer seems to work with unnatural violence.' Hazlitt was possibly even more apposite in his *Lectures on the English Poets*, where he characterised the style of the odes as 'a kind of methodical borrowed phrenzy' (*Hazlitt*, v, 118). The phrase could serve as an almost perfect description of Coleridge's hysterical sublime as well.[51]

McFarland's criticisms are just, though the hysteria in the poem arises, perhaps, from an attempt to infuse urgency and passion into the writing. The tumultuous events occurring throughout Europe gave Coleridge his cause, and his solution to these

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[50] Schulz organises Coleridge's poetry into nine voices, but he could not place 'Religious Musings' in any single category. Cf. *The Poetic voices of Coleridge: A Study of His Desire for Spontaneity and Passion for Order* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p.191.

[51] Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.245n.

problems was the 'system of Christ'. The central importance of Christ in the way that Coleridge conceived of the poem may be seen by considering the history of its composition.

Coleridge's earliest references to the poem suggest that from its inception, Coleridge intended to address the defining Unitarian issue, the person of Christ. Writing from London on 29 December 1794 to Southey, Coleridge turns from the troubling subject of his impending marriage, to relate the difficulties facing the Lamb family. Mary Lamb's condition was exerting a considerable strain on all the family, and Charles Lamb himself was to spend a brief spell in a mental institution within the year.[52] But characteristically, Coleridge does not miss an opportunity to proclaim his current religious and metaphysical preoccupation:

> Her illness preyed a good deal on his Spirits—though he bore it with an apparent equanimity, as beseemed him who like me is a Unitarian Christian and an Advocate for the Automatism of Man.—
> I was writing a poem which when finished you shall see—and wished him to describe the Character & Doctrines of Jesus Christ for me—but his low Spirits prevented him— The Poem is in blank Verse on the Nativity. (*CL* i. 147)

The casual way in which Coleridge describes its initial composition – 'I was writing a poem which when finished you shall see' – makes it quite clear that the date of composition given with the completed poem should be understood figuratively.

Coleridge does not mention the poem until October of the following year, when he writes to Cottle to describe his progress. His description further emphasises that composition was effusive but laboured:

> The Nativity is not quite three hundred Lines—it has cost me much labor [sic] in polishing, more than any poem I ever wrote—and I believe, deserves it more—Before it be sent to the press, if you would desire Mr Estlin to peruse it, and to correct anything

[52] Park, Roy, ed., *Lamb as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.2.

> he particularly dislikes, I should thank you—/ and let it be printed as he returns it—for I have an implicit confidence in the soundness of his Taste in compositions of the higher cast. (*CL* i. 162-3)

Coleridge's comment relating to Estlin is remarkable. Firstly it is strange that Coleridge, having devoted so much labour to 'polishing' the poem, should then instruct Cottle to 'correct anything he [Estlin] particularly dislikes', and for it then to be printed without further consultation.[53] This may well have been false modesty on Coleridge's part, perhaps expecting unconditional affirmation from Estlin. But a mixture of pride and indifference was to characterise Coleridge's attitude towards the poem for many years to come.

More revealing, however, is the idea that the poem can be in some way corrected at all. It suggests that Coleridge considered the poem an argument that can be assessed as true or false, as if it were a lecture or philosophical treatise.[54] Of course it may be on the grounds of taste that Coleridge intended him to 'correct anything he particularly dislikes', but Estlin is an odd choice of person for such a task. Indeed six months later Coleridge would make luke-warm comments on Estlin's compositional ability, when describing his *Evidences of Christianity* to the Rev. John Edwards: 'Estlin's Sermon has some good Points in it; but Estlin hath not the catenating Faculty – he wants the silk thread that ought to run through the Pearl-chain of Ratiocination'.[55]

Estlin is a good choice, however, if Coleridge's intention is to integrate himself into the dissenting network. Coleridge may well have wished to offer the poem as a

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[53] Jack Stillinger notes that this paradoxical attitude is common in Coleridge's approach to his work: 'Throughout his career, he alternated, sometimes unexplainably, between a state of complete control over his projects [...] and a state of total indifference and laxity, almost as if his works were the creations of someone he did not know.' Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.11.

[54] Wilbur notes that Priestley placed his work before Lindsey and 'came to submit to his judgment anything that he wrote on theology before publishing it' (*History of Unitarianism*, p.298). Coleridge may well have been aware of this, and was partly modelling himself on Priestley.

[55] *CL* i. 193 (20 March 1796).

contribution to the cause. Indeed at a time when Unitarians were trying to establish a liturgy to make their form of worship distinct from Anglicanism, perhaps Coleridge had ambitions to make 'Religious Musings' part of a Unitarian canon. This may explain the enumeration of the poem when it was published in *1796* (the only poem Coleridge enumerated), as if to make it suitable for citation of parts in Unitarian worship. Coleridge probably used the poem in a number of different pulpits during his 'Watchman Tour' of January and February, 1796.[56]

It was not until early March 1796 that Coleridge could finally write to Cottle that 'the Religious Musings are finished', though as quoted above, Cottle claimed that he continued to work on it after this.[57] Coleridge's 'Nativity', nearly eighteen months in gestation, was finally delivered.

Kitson has suggested that 'Religious Musings' is a 'Unitarian version of *Paradise Lost*', which is an apt comparison and one that Coleridge probably had in mind; certainly Charles Lamb understood the poems in a similar light (see below).[58] The presence of an Argument, and perhaps the enumeration, suggest formal inheritances from Milton, and the diction throughout is obviously an imitation of the epic style of *Paradise Lost*. Coleridge's mini-epic, however, centres on Christ rather than Satan or Adam, and Coleridge's early working title for his poem – the 'Nativity' – suggests another model also in Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' (hereafter the *Nativity*).[59] Indeed both poets began their Nativity's at the beginning of their poetic careers (Milton was twenty-one, and Coleridge twenty-two as they begun their poems). The importance of the *Nativity* to Milton has been described as follows:

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[56] *LPR* contains a sermon delivered 31 January 1796, with 'Harp'd by Arch-angels when they sing of Mercy' forming the poetic crescendo to a description of the person of Christ.
[57] *CL* i. 187.
[58] Peter J. Kitson, 'Coleridge, Milton and the Millennium', *WC*, 18 (1987), 61-6 (p.64).
[59] Compare, for example, the opening lines: 'This is the month, and this the happy morn' (*Nativity*); 'This is the time, when most divine to hear' ('Religious Musings').

> The *Nativity* is only Milton's third original English poem, and by far the most ambitious. It is also the first to deal with a specifically religious theme. [...] It is seen to mark an important moment in Milton's early evolution – in fact, to reveal a new element in its pattern [...] – an earnest (for how else can we take it?) of the higher poetry that he hopes to compose.[60]

This poem is not just about the nativity of Christ, but about the birth of Milton as a religious poet. Similarly for Coleridge understood his 'Religious Musings' to be his great poetical statement through which he hoped to establish his reputation as a religious poet. And by actively modelling his poem on Milton's writing (his prose anti-Episcopal tracts as well as his poetry),[61] Coleridge signals his intention to express religious and political ideas in his poem.

The opening of the poem could almost be an address to a congregation singing hymns ('the voice of Adoration') at midnight mass on Christmas Eve:

> This is the time, when most divine to hear,
> As with a Cherub's 'loud uplifted' trump
> The voice of Adoration my thrill'd heart
> Rouses! And with the rushing noise of wings
> Transports my spirit to the favor'd fields
> Of Bethlehem, there in shepherd's guise to sit
> Sublime of extacy, and mark entranc'd
> The glory-streaming VISION throng the night. (ll.1-8)

The sense that the opening is spoken from a pulpit is further suggested by the allusion in the second line ('loud uplifted') to Milton's 'At a solemn Music', a title which might be paraphrased as 'at a Sacred Concert', or perhaps, 'at a Religious Service'.[62] There is also a sense that the speaker is in solitude, however, as it is only he whose heart is roused and whose spirit is transported. The consciousness of the speaker is

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[60] A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton*, 6 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), ii, pp.19 & 24.
[61] Cf. Kitson, *Coleridge, Milton and the Millennium*, p.61.
[62] Woodhouse, *A Variorum Commentary*, p.175.

never really established or settled in the poem, however.

Although the speaker has placed himself amongst the shepherds of the nativity recorded in Luke's gospel, this scene features very little of the traditional nativity imagery.[63] Of more importance to Coleridge is the cosmic significance of Christ's birth, an event portrayed as surpassing the original act of creation:

> Ah not more radiant, nor loud harmonies
> Hymning more unimaginably sweet
> With choral songs around th'Eternal Mind,
> The constellated company of Worlds
> Danc'd jubilant: what time the startling East
> Saw from her dark womb leap her flamy Child!
> Glory to God in the Highest! Peace on Earth! (ll.9-15)

Wylie interprets this passage as a celebration of the rising sun on the first Christmas Day, when the reader, he argues, had been expecting a celebration of the birth of Christ.[64] However, from both the above extract, and from an equivalent passage in Milton's *Nativity* (which Wylie quotes), it seems clear that Coleridge is referring to the first light of the creation following God's command 'let there be light'. This is unusually impassioned praise for a Unitarian. Although Priestley, for example, understood Christ's mission as the perfecting of humanity's knowledge of their duty in this life and expectations in the next, he would not understand Christ's birth to surpass the Creation. Christ is merely a messenger, delivering information at God's perfect work.

Having portrayed Christ's birth to be superior even to the original act of creation, however, Coleridge is careful to distinguish Christ from the light. The light comes through Christ, the instrument of God's purpose:

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[63] This is particularly true of *1797*, with only six lines depicting the nativity (as opposed to fifteen in *1796*).
[64] *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, pp.92-3.

> Yet Thou more bright than all that Angel Blaze,
> Despised GALILEAN! Man of Woes!
> For chiefly in the oppressed Good Man's face
> The Great Invisible (by symbols seen)
> Shines with peculiar and concentred light,
> When all of Self regardless the scourg'd Saint
> Mourns for th'Oppressor. O thou meekest Man!
> Meek Man and lowliest of the Sons of Men!
> Who thee beheld thy imag'd Father saw. (ll.16-27)[65]

The capitalised 'GALILEAN', four repetitions of 'man', and the qualities of meekness and lowliness emphasise the humanity of Christ. His divinity, not his own, symbolically radiates through his acts, with a 'peculiar and concentred light' from (paradoxically) the 'Great Invisible'. God may not be literally seen, but is a presence that may be symbolically apprehended, in this case through the act of mourning the oppressor. But Coleridge appears to have moved away from describing Christ in particular, to describe 'the scourg'd Saint [who] Mourns for th'Oppressor.' The change to the present tense in this line suggests that it is the act, and not the saint, being celebrated. Through this act of mourning, the apparent separation between the oppressor and his victim is transcended, and this process serves to justify Coleridge's Unitarian reading of the gospel of John which is quoted in a footnote to the final line above:

> Philip saith unto him, Lord! shew us the Father and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father. John XIV. 9. (*1796*, p.169)

Similarly Coleridge presented Christ as favoured by God, and being identified with God only when he acted with perfect selflessness: 'His [God's] Power and Wisdom

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[65] The enumeration in *1796* is incorrect at this point in *1796*. Hence the above nine lines are numbered as if there were eleven.

from thy awful eye | Blended their beams' (ll.28-9). It is for this reason that Coleridge dedicates a section to Christ's prayer on the cross. It is an act which manifests the unity of all created things (as had the 'scourg'd Saint'), and cheats death: 'Hell her yawning mouth | Clos'd a brief moment' (ll.35-6).

When Coleridge revised the poem for publication in *1797*, he re-wrote the lines describing the person of Christ, removing the reference to John, and instead defining Christ in relation to Nature:

> Fair the vernal Mead,
> Fair the high Grove, the Sea, the Sun, the Stars;
> True Impress each of their creating Sire!
> Yet nor high Grove, nor many-coloured Mead,
> Nor the green Ocean with his thousand Isles,
> Nor the starr'd Azure, nor the sovran Sun,
> E'er with such majesty of portaiture
> Imag'd the supreme beauty uncreate,
> As thou, meek Saviour! at the fearful hour
> When thy insulted Anguish wing'd the prayer
> Harp'd by Archangels, when they sing of Mercy! (*1797*, ll.15-24)

There is a tonal control in this extract, created largely through a slower-paced development and repetition of the imagery, that is reminiscent of the Conversation Poems. The first version of 'Religious Musings' had favoured Christ's birth over the genesis of nature, whereas the second version compares Christ to a natural scene that is less figurative. There is still personification ('Ocean with his thousand Isles') and abstraction in the scenes described, but compared to 'the constellated company of WORLDS' singing 'unimaginably sweet' hymns, and dancing jubilant, the second version is more naturalistic.

Nature is, however, like Christ, an 'impress', portrait, or 'image' of the 'creating Sire', and is not celebrated for its own sake. It is either a stage in the transcendence of the visible realm, or a leitmotif used to illustrate the agency of Christ's doctrines. The

latter can be seen in the following extract:

> Lovely was the Death
> Of Him, whose Life was Love! Holy with power
> He on the thought-benighted Sceptic beam'd
> Manifest Godhead, melting into day
> What Mists dim-floating of Idolatry
> Split and misshap'd the Omnipresent Sire. (ll.37-42)

The natural imagery serves only as a simile for the effect of Christ's 'power' on the 'Sceptic', but reveals nothing about either Christ or the Sceptic.[66] This extract is simply a paean of praise for the victorious Christ whose death is a cause for celebration. Coleridge does not chose to evoke the suffering of Christ by, for example, narrating the humiliation of his trial, his scourging, his crown of thorns, having to carry his own cross, or indeed the tragic cry of despair from psalm 22.[67] Instead Christ's existence is treated exclusively as the revelation of ideas and not, perhaps surprisingly for a Unitarian, as a suffering man. This dehumanisation is what enables Coleridge to see Christ's brutal death as 'lovely', although it is always a problem for an optimist to evoke suffering without undercutting it by focusing on the happy outcome.[68]

The phrase 'Manifest Godhead' is unexpected, suggesting as it does the Trinity. It is related to Paul's epistle to the Colossians:

> Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of

[66] Later in the poem (ll.106-18), Coleridge would again use natural imagery as a simile, to describe the faith of the 'elect'. A footnote added to *1797* would explain the significance: 'Our evil Passions, under the influence of Religion, become innocent, and may be made to animate our virtue – in the same manner as the thick mist melted by the Sun, increases the light which it had before excluded. In the preceding paragraph, agreeably to this truth, we had allegorically narrated the transfiguration of Fear into holy Awe' (*1797*, p.190). The imagery is simply illustrative of Coleridge's philosophical assumptions, though bears no meaningful connection with the ideas.

[67] 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?', Mt 27, 45 & Mk 15, 34.

[68] See also Wylie's discussion of Christ as the 'renewer of the ancient truth', for another reason for Coleridge's treatment of Christ in terms of ideas rather than humanity. Cf. *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, ch.1.

> men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. (Col. 2.8-10)

Priestley had commented on this passage in *A Familiar Illustration of Certain Passages of Scripture* (1770), aware that it seemed to support the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. He wrote:

> 'In him dwelleth all the fulness of the godhead bodily.' This is a very proper expression, being strictly and literally true, though Christ himself was a mere man, since the wisdom and power of the one true God, the Father, were manifest in, and acted by him, agreeably to his own declarations, that the words which he spake were not his own, but the Father's who sent him, and that the Father within him did the works. Nay, this very expression, that the fulness of the godhead dwelled or resided in him, seems to imply that it did not naturally belong to him. Besides, phrases similar to this are applied by way of figure, to Christians in general. They are said to be 'partakers of the Divine nature,' 2 Pet.i.4, to 'be filled with all the fulness of God,' Eph. iii.1, and to be 'the fulness of him that filleth all in all,' Eph. i.23.
>
> These observations will easily help us to understand what is meant by Christ being called 'the image of the invisible God,' Col.i.15, 2Cor.iv.4, 'and the express image of his person,' Heb.i.3 and also his 'being in the form of God,' Philip.ii.6; for they all allude to the divine power and wisdom which were displayed in him when he was on earth, but more especially now that he is ascended into heaven.[69]

It seems likely that Coleridge knew this work, and there is much in this extract that is consistent with the theology of 'Religious Musings'. Indeed Coleridge may have had this passage in mind when he wrote to Lamb in September 1796 to console him after the horrific death of his mother. Coleridge wrote: 'I charge you, my dearest friend, not to dare to encourage gloom or despair. You are a temporary sharer in human miseries that you may be an eternal partaker of the Divine nature'.[70] Somewhat surprisingly Lamb does not object to the instruction not to *dare* fall into despair, or the panglossian attitude towards 'human miseries'; Lamb takes issue with the theological implications of Coleridge's consolations:

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[69] *Rutt*, ii, 450-1.
[70] *CL* i. 239.

> In your first fine consolatory epistle you say, 'you are a temporary sharer in human misery, that you may be an eternal partaker of the Divine Nature.' What more than this do those men say, who are for exalting the man Christ Jesus into the second person of an unknown Trinity, — men, whom you or I scruple not to call idolaters? (*LL* i. 48)

Coleridge's reply to this remonstration has been lost but Lamb's next letter shows that the former stood by his advice:

> My dear Friend, I am not ignorant that to be a partaker of the Divine Nature is a phrase to be met with in Scripture: I am only apprehensive, lest we in these latter days, tinctured (some of us perhaps pretty deeply) with mystical notions and the pride of metaphysics, might be apt to affix to such phrases a meaning, which the primitive users of them, the simple fishermen of Galilee for instance, never intended to convey. (*LL* i. 50)

This response is interesting, even if the description of St. Paul as one of the simple fishermen of Galilee is confused. Lamb's response does, however, suggest the Unitarian emphasis on the earliest Christians as an interpretative guide to the significance of Christ's ministry, but also the perceived progression since then in understanding the 'Divine Nature'. Lamb implies that the more reasonable eighteenth century mind is able to see through the limitations of the relatively ignorant writers of the New Testament.

Lamb's letter reveals a practical rather than theologically sophisticated approach to Christianity however. Describing his anxiety that in these 'latter days' metaphysics and mysticism may distort the meaning of the Bible, he is concerned that no 'mystical notions' would be used to console him in his mourning.[71] This suspicion of mysticism is characteristic of Unitarianism, as can be seen in the above extract from Priestley in which he takes care to maintain a strict divide between God and man. Discussing the expression 'the godhead dwelled or resided in him', Priestley writes: 'phrases similar

[71] Lamb was vigilant in his rejection of mysticism. Thanking Coleridge in October 1796 for his consolatory letters, Lamb had one criticism of his discussions of religion: 'We [Charles and Mary] are offended occasionally with a certain freedom of expression, a certain air of mysticism, more consonant to the conceits of pagan philosophy, than consistent with the humility of genuine piety' (*LL* i. 48).

to this are applied *by way of figure*, to Christians in general' (my italics).

Coleridge was cautious of introducing mysticism into his poem, however, and the following extract, describing 'the process of his Doctrines on the mind of the Individual', is a case in point:

> And first by TERROR, Mercy's startling prelude,
> Uncharm'd the Spirit spell-bound with earthly lusts
> Till of it's nobler Nature it 'gan feel
> Dim recollections; and thence soar'd to HOPE,
> Strong to believe whate'er of mystic good
> Th'ETERNAL dooms for his IMMORTAL Sons.
> From HOPE and stronger FAITH to perfect LOVE
> Attracted and absorb'd: and center'd there
> GOD only to behold, and know, and feel,
> Till by exclusive Consciousness of GOD
> All self-annihilated it shall make
> GOD it's Identity: God all in all!
> We and our Father ONE! (ll.43-55)

This passage is a curious mixture of mysticism and science. On the one hand it describes the freeing of the spirit from 'earthly lusts', figured as a charm or spell. By breaking the spell, the spirit may begin to recollect its 'nobler Nature', prompting it, through hope and faith, to 'perfect LOVE'. The spirit will then have attained a selfless union with God, a condition of unity that all can achieve but which Christ had first revealed. Hence 'I and my Father are one' (John 10.30), becomes 'We and our Father ONE!' The phrase 'exclusive *Consciousness* of GOD' may suggest both 'awareness' of God, and *the* consciousness of God.

On the other hand it is described to be a 'process' and any sense of holy mystery surrounding this mystical union with God is eliminated. Indeed in case a reader should consider this passage to have 'a certain air of mysticism' as Lamb might have put it, Coleridge appended a note to this section in *1797*:

> See this *demonstrated* by Hartley, vol. 1. p.114, and vol. 2, p.329. See it likewise proved, and freed from the charge of Mysticism, by Pistorius in his Notes and Additions to part second of Hartley on Man. Addition the 18th, the 653d page of the third Volume of Hartley. Octavo Edition. (*1797*, p.122)

In Hartley, Coleridge found a rational discourse that described the process of salvation, Christ had enacted.[72]

A letter written to Cottle in 1814 in which Coleridge discusses 'Religious Musings', offers a helpful context through which to understand the 'TERROR' of the first line above:

> It is a perilous state in which a Christian stands, if he has gotten no further than to avoid evil from the fear of hell! This is no part of the Christian religion, but a preparatory awakening of the soul: a means of dispersing those gross films which render the eye of the spirit incapable of any religion, much less of such a faith as that of the love of Christ. (*CL* iv. 468)

Although by the time of writing this letter, Coleridge had long since abandoned attempts to present the French Revolution part of a millennial renewal, it is not difficult to see how this conception of 'fear' as a 'preparatory awakening of the soul' could have been mapped onto the fate of the whole nation. Indeed it seems unlikely that Coleridge did not have the French Revolution in mind when capitalising 'TERROR'.[73]

The 'French Revolution' and 'the present War' are substantial parts of 'Religious Musings', though in Coleridge's treatment of them he uses Christ to shame the

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[72] For a more detailed reading of this 'process' see *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.97.

[73] When revising the poem for *1797*, 'TERROR' became 'FEAR'. This perhaps reflects Coleridge's growing disapproval of the direction of the French nation. Cf. 'Remonstrance to the French Legislators' in *TW*, 269-73, published just over two weeks after *1796*.
Cronin has argued that Coleridge's foregrounding of the time of composition ('Christmas Eve, in the year of our Lord, 1794') was an implicit rejection of the French attempts to recast time into 'decadi': 'The new calendar was an integral part of the Jacobin programme of aggressive dechristianization. [...] Coleridge's nativity poem rejects the Jacobin attempt to demystify the calendar: it re-inscribes the notion that time is divinely ordained rather than an instrument of state policy, and this is part of a larger attempt to redefine the French Revolution as an unfolding of God's providential purpose rather than what it was for the Jacobins, an affirmation that history was determined not by God but by human and natural agencies.' Cf. *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, p.26.

aggression on the English side, but also to justify the violence on the part of the French. As I have discussed, Coleridge treats Christ as an emblem of the process of self-annihilation, that will eventual reach an all-encompassing unity. The 'Messiah's destin'd victory' is a state where each individual, by sacred sympathy, form one altruistic whole:

> The whole ONE SELF ! SELF, that no alien knows !
> SELF, far diffus'd as Fancy's wing can travel!
> SELF, spreading still ! Oblivious of its own,
> Yet all of all possessing ! This is FAITH !
> This is the MESSIAH'S destin'd victory ! (ll.174-8)

The profusion of exclamation marks conveys Coleridge's rampant anticipation of the final victory, when the battle against self-centredness is won. The next section sets Christ in the context of a quite different battle: the 'Digression to the Present War'. Owing much to Gilbert Wakefield's *Spirit of Christianity Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain*, Coleridge depicts the war as being in Christ's name with heavy irony:[74]

> THEE to defend, meek Galilean! THEE
> And thy mild laws of Love unutterable,
> Mistrust and Enmity have burst the bands
> Of social Peace; and list'ning Treachery lurks
> With *pious* fraud to snare a brother's life;
> And childless widows o'er the groaning land
> Wail numberless; and orphans weep for bread!
> THEE to defend, dear Saviour of Mankind!
> THEE, Lamb of God! THEE, blameless Prince of Peace! (ll.181-89)

This passage is a condensed and rhetorically forceful attack on the effects of the war on the social fabric of England. The network of spies that listen for treason in public meetings turn each man against his brother, families are bereft and starving. In the

[74] For the relationship between Wakefield's discourse and 'Religious Musings', see *The Active Universe*, pp.27ff.

first number of *The Watchman* Coleridge writes a 'Review of Motions for Peace', quoting the following comments by Lord Abingdon:

> The best road to Peace, my Lords is War! and War carried on in the same manner in which we are taught to worship our Creator, namely, with all our souls, and with all our minds, and with all our hearts, and with all our strength. (*TW*, 20)

In *1797*, Coleridge would append this extract to the above section of 'Religious Musings' to emphasise the contrast between his understanding of the mission of Christ and the prosecution of the war in his name.

This pacifistic Christ, however, forms a dramatic contrast with the role of the 'Lamb of God' later in the poem. Christ opens the seals unleashing terrible vengeance on 'the Kings and the Chief Captains of the World', who, 'shall be cast to earth, | Vile and down-trodden, as the untimely fruit | Shook from the fig-tree by a sudden storm' (ll.330-4). The following line and a footnote establish that the storm is not just a figurative one; it is the French Revolution. Christ it seems, the 'Prince of Peace', is unleashing revolution and war.

As I have discussed above, the context of publication in *The Watchman* strongly supports a literal application of Revelation to European politics. In 'Religious Musings', however, the context makes this apocalyptic denouement an altogether more cautious millennial fantasy. Whilst 'The Present State of Society' had stopped with the view of the 'blest Future' following the destruction of the whore 'Mystery' and the 'Daemon Power' (Church and State), 'Religious Musings' continues with a vision of Christ leading the 'mighty Dead':

> For in his own and in his Father's might
> The SAVIOUR comes! While as to solemn strains
> The THOUSAND YEARS lead up their mystic dance,
> [...] The mighty Dead

> Rise to new life, whoe'er from earliest time
> With conscious zeal had urg'd Love's wond'rous plan
> Coadjutors of God. (ll.376-87)

The 'mighty Dead' of Revelation were the 'souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image' (Rev. 20. 4-5). Coleridge, however, picks out just four of the 'mighty Dead': Milton, Newton, Hartley and Priestley. These choices reveal something of the character of the workings of 'Love's wond'rous plan' as Coleridge understands it; it is a lengthy process involving poets and philosophers, contributing to the gradual revolution in understanding.

Though Coleridge is confident in blessing his heroes as having a divine purpose, he can see no further than the millennium:

> Ye, blest Years! Must end,
> And all beyond is darkness! Heights most strange!
> Whence Fancy falls, fluttering her idle wing.
> For who of woman born may paint the hour,
> When seiz'd in his mid course the Sun shall wane
> Making noon ghastly! (ll.407-412)

Coleridge can take his vision no further, and like Priestley, is unable to apply the discern the significance of the visions of Revelation. For all their certainty of the plain and simple meaning in the Bible, they both stumble when trying to find literal contemporary correspondences.

Coleridge concludes the poem pledging to discipline himself in the hope of joining his heroes:

> I haply journeying my immortal course
> Shall sometime join your mystic choir! Till then
> I discipline my young noviciate thought
> In ministeries of heart-stirring song. (ll.436-9)

This is a somewhat coy ending to the poem, considering that he has been declaring 'truth of subliming import', declaiming the sins of the Church and State, and prophesying their downfall. The word 'ministeries' suggests that he is committing himself to writing poetry in the cause of religion, but for all the metaphysics of 'Religious Musings', he hopes to write '*heart*-stirring song'. Ultimately, 'musings' is an appropriate description for the episodes comprising the poem, partially organised into a system, and gathered under the banner 'Religious'.

iii. 'Read with a Poet's Eye'[75]

'Religious Musings' was generally well received when it was published, and Coleridge summarised the reviews in a letter to Estlin in July 1796:

> The Reviews have been wonderful—The Monthly has *cataracted* panegyric on my poems; the Critical has *cascaded* it; and the Analytical has *dribbled* it with very tolerable civility. The Monthly has at least done justice to my Religious Musings—they place it 'on the very top of the scale of Sublimity.[']—! —!—! (*CL* i. 224)

This is a largely accurate synopsis of the reviews, and though they tended to agree that the diction was flawed, they thought the volume portended genius. An anonymous piece in the *Analytical Review* referring to *1796*, for example, warned that 'the language, through a redundancy of metaphor, and the frequent use of compound epithets, sometimes becomes turgid'.[76] The reviewer senses more genius than taste in Coleridge, but reserves praise for 'Religious Musings': 'the last piece is a pretty long

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[75] *CL* i. 205.
[76] Quoted in *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.33.

poem, in blank verse, chiefly valuable for the importance of the sentiments which it contains, and the ardour with which they are expressed'.[77]

More interesting than the published reviews however, are the responses of John Thelwall and Charles Lamb, preserved in correspondence. Sending *1796* to John Thelwall late in April, Coleridge told him 'I build all my poetic pretentions on the Religious Musings', and urges him to read it 'with a POET'S Eye, with the same unprejudiceness, I wish, I could add, the same pleasure with which the atheistic Poem of Lucretius'.[78] Knowing Thelwall to be an atheist, he stresses the poetic rather than religious content of the poem, though initially it is the poetic achievement that Coleridge celebrated to a number of friends and acquaintances, religious or otherwise. He told Unitarian Benjamin Flower, for example, 'I rest for all my poetical credit on the *Religious Musings*'; and Poole a week later 'I rest for all my poetical credit on the *Religious Musings*'.[79]

Thelwall did admire many sections of the poem however. A passage containing the sections on 'Superstition' and 'Digression to the Present War', 'delights me very much' he told Coleridge. And the ensuing passage (from the 'Origin and Uses of Government and Property' to the 'French Revolution') 'breathes a rapture & energy of mind seldom to be met with among modern bards.'[80] It is perhaps not surprising that Thelwall should prefer these passages as they contain an account of the history of civilization that makes little explicit reference to religion.

The section starts in a 'primeval age a dateless while' (l.218), and attempts to account for the inequality and corruption of contemporary society by telling 'the story of mankind as a history of the development of knowledge of the fundamental truths of

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[77] *Ibid*, p.33.
[78] *CL* i. 205.
[79] *CL* i. 197 (April 1 1796) & *CL* i. 203 (April 11 1796).
[80] Warren E. Gibbs, 'An Unpublished Letter from John Thelwall to S.T. Coleridge', *MLR*, 25 (1930), 85-90 (pp.88-9).

science and society, now being revealed in his own age.'[81] 'Imagination' is the tempter in this re-write of the fall:

> In the primeval age a dateless while
> The vacant Shepherd wander'd with his flock
> Pitching his tent where'er the green grass wav'd.
> But soon Imagination conjur'd up
> An host of new desires: with busy aim,
> Each for himself, Earth's eager children toil'd,
> So PROPERTY began, twy-streaming fount,
> Whence Vice and Virtue flow, honey and gall. (ll.218-24)

This history is clearly similar to that in the final lecture discussed in the previous chapter, though in abbreviated form. There is a notable change, however, in Coleridge's attitude towards Property. No longer seeing it solely as the progenitor of 'private Vices and Public Wars', he presents it as the fount of virtue also.[82] The reason for this modification, as Wylie suggests above, is Coleridge's interest in natural and metaphysical philosophy that were the product to some extent of the growth of towns and cities. The 'imagination' that had spurred the desire to accumulate would not be sated by the luxuries of property and wealth, and so urges philosophical investigation. The knowledge of 'Philosophers and bards' could then ripple through society, restoring an understanding of the ordered progress towards renewal:

> From Avarice thus, from Luxury and War
> Sprang heavenly Science: and from Science Freedom.
> O'er waken'd realms Philosophers and Bards
> Spread in concentric circles: they whose souls
> Conscious of their high dignities from God
> Brook not Wealth's rivalry; and they who long
> Enamour'd with the charms of order hate
> Th'unseemly disproportion. (ll.243-50)

Coleridge presents science as 'heavenly' and 'philosophers and bards' as in some way

[81] *Coleridge and the Philosophers*, p.105.
[82] *LPR*, 219.

indebted to God, but this history is not as explicitly religious as the rest of the poem; and Thelwall could find nothing to please him in the other sections:

> Praise belongs almost exclusively to those parts that are not at all religious. As for the generality of those passages which are most so, they are certainly anything in the world rather than poetry, unless indeed the mere glowing rapidity of blank verse may entitle them to that distinction. They are the very acme of abstruse, metaphysical, mistical [sic] rant, & all ranting abstractions, metaphysic & mysticism are wider from true poetry than the equator from the poles. The whole poem also is infected with inflation & turgidity.[83]

Although Thelwall is principally objecting to the religious content, his criticism of the poem as poetry is severe. In response to Thelwall's reply, Coleridge no longer appealed to the poet's eye, but pointed to the difference in their religious outlooks:

> That Poetry pleases which interests—*my* religious poetry interests the *religious*, who read it with rapture—why? because it awakes in them all the associations connected with a love of future existence &c—. A very dear friend of mine, who is in my opinion the best poet of the age (I will send you his Poem when published) thinks that the lines from 364 to 375 & from 403 to 428 the best in the Volume — indeed worth all the rest — And this man is a Republican & at least a *Semi*-atheist. (*CL* i. 215)

This is something of a retreat by Coleridge. Whatever the truth of his comments on the religious finding meaningful associations, it is a different proposition to requesting Thelwall to view his poem with a poet's eye. The '*Semi*-atheist' was of course Wordsworth. The passages Wordsworth apparently preferred are neither explicitly political or doctrinal. Both are retreats from the 'action' of the poem, as the author reflects on his visions of the 'French Revolution' and the 'Millennium'. It would appear that Wordsworth was most interested in the passages when Coleridge was not declaring systems or sermonising, but when he was self-consciously considering his role as a poet.

The responses of Charles Lamb by contrast are little short of idolatrous, as both

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[83] Ibid, 87.

poetry and religious statement: 'I can only admire; and thank you for it in the name of a Christian as well as a Lover of good Poetry'.[84] Despite this admiration of the poem as both a religious and a poetical tour de force, it appears to be the former that most excited him in 'Religious Musings':

> I was reading your Religious Musings the other day, & sincerely I think it the noblest poem in the language, next after the Paradise lost; & even that was not made the vehicle of such grand truths. 'There is one mind,' &c., down to 'Almighty's Throne,' are without a rival in the whole compass of my poetical reading. 'Stands in the sun, & with no partial gaze Views all creation' – I wish I could have written those lines. (*LL* i. 93)

The phrase 'the vehicle of such grand truths' suggests that Coleridge was right to think that the religious, or at least some of them, would find the poem stirring for the associations it carries. Lamb's adulation of people or things with a 'religious strain' could be extraordinary, however. He told Coleridge in February 1797, 'you were building your house on a rock, when you rested your fame on that poem. I can scarce bring myself to believe, that I am admitted to a familiar correspondence, and all the licence of friendship, with a man who writes blank verse like Milton'.[85]

Few critics have agreed with Lamb's assessment of either the poems merits, either as poetry or vehicle of grand truths. Unexpected praise would come from an anonymous Unitarian who wrote to Coleridge in response to his slating criticism of Unitarianism in the *Lay Sermons*.[86] He cited 'Religious Musings' as evidence of Coleridge's former anti-Church views, but he could not find a clear Unitarian position in the poem, or indeed a clear system of any kind. He did, however, consider it a 'beautiful poem':

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[84] *LL* i. 16. Lamb's adulation of people or things with a 'religious strain' tended to be expressed with hyperbole: 'You were building your house on a rock, when you rested your fame on that poem. I can scarce bring myself to believe, that I am admitted to a familiar correspondence, and all the licence of friendship, with a man who writes blank verse like Milton.' (Feb 1797: *LL* i. 100).
[85] *LL* i. 100.
[86] For Coleridge's censure of Unitarianism, cf. *LS*, 181-4.

> It is full of bright visions, half unveiled – of unbounded and indistinct prospects – of noble aspirations after all kinds of imaginary excellence. As a system of religion or metaphysics, it is neither very intelligible nor very consistent; but it is decidedly opposed to most of those sentiments which the author has since learned to admire. (*LS*, 259)

The comments would come twenty years after the publication of 'Religious Musings', however, by which time Coleridge did not appear to value the poem. He would begin the *Biographia* by citing the poem as the epitome of his youthful tendency to write with 'obscurity [and] a general turgidness of diction'. Such was his change of favour towards the poem that he omitted it from *Sibylline Leaves* published at the same time as the *Biographia.*[87]

The differing responses to the poem from Thelwall and Lamb, however, must have made it clear to Coleridge that he needed to be more careful in the assumptions he made of his audience. The religious and political inclinations of his audience would not simply melt into agreement as if he were preaching self-evident universal truths. Roe has suggested that the failure of *The Watchman* was also, in part, related to audience:

> Coleridge may have misjudged his readership. Having set out to appeal to dissenters, and made numerous contacts on his tour, there is actually remarkably little in *The Watchman* that addressed the dissenting issues and causes. [...] Coleridge compounded this default in his 'Essay on Fasts' in the second number. [...] Joking about the scriptures was not calculated to impress many of his readers. [...] He followed the 'Essay on Fasts' with articles [...] attacking the 'viciousness' of Godwin's principles in *Political Justice*. In doing so he was following an argument he had already used in his political and religious lectures, but to attack Godwin risked alienating the secular,

[87] Morton D. Paley suggests that Coleridge's reason for omitting the poem 'lies in the millennial vision [...] with its roots in a tradition that Coleridge was especially anxious to distance himself from'. It is odd, however, that in one of the more memorable anecdotes in *BL*, Coleridge recalls attempting to persuade a tallow chandler to take up subscription to *The Watchman*. Though unsuccessful, in the attempt he would recite part of the millennial vision, and prints it in *BL* (i. 181). It seems more likely that Coleridge omitted the poem simply because it had been discussed in negative terms in the opening of *BL*, and perhaps also because *LS* with its dramatically more favourable attitude towards the Church would be published the same year. Cf. Morton D. Paley, '"These Promised Years": Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' and the Millenarianism of the 1790s', in *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, eds. Keith Hanley and R. Selden (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 49-65 (p.51).

intellectual coterie among his readership. (*Watchman Tour*, p.44)

Coleridge's misunderstanding of his audience probably contributed to a more general struggle to find a voice suited to his ambitious aims. The lengthy composition of 'Religious Musings' may account for a tone that varies from a cultivated optimistic calm to hysterical indignation. But Coleridge had problems with the tone of *The Watchman* also. The 'Essay on Fasts' is the most obvious example, but a reply to the letter 'To Caius Gracchus' in the fifth number justly responds with irony to Coleridge's claim to write the 'Truth in the spirit of meekness'.[88]

Lewis Patton has suggested that *The Watchman* represented to Coleridge 'an alternative pulpit to the one he rejected when he refused to take orders'.[89] The pulpit suggests an address to a largely consenting congregation, who are joined together through a common creed. If Coleridge made this assumption about his audience in 'Religious Musings' and *The Watchman* it does account, to a certain extent, for his misunderstanding of his audience. In the final chapter, I will explore how Coleridge's experiences in dissenting pulpits influenced his conception of the 'cause of religion'.

[88] Coleridge made this claim in the 'Introductory Essay' (*TW*, 14). For the reply to the letter 'To Caius Gracchus' see *TW*, 194.
[89] *TW*, xxxvi.

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'I must become a Unitarian minister as a less evil than starvation'[1]

Coleridge and the Pulpit

Coleridge's preaching, between 1795-8 generally excited extraordinary praise from those fortunate enough to hear him. In many respects preaching was the ideal form of address for Coleridge. As the 'inspired talker' whose eloquence was nearly always enlisted in defence of religion, preaching allowed him a potentially huge audience. The pulpit held a central role in the public and social life of England, and as an itinerant preacher, he addressed many congregations over a two and a half year period. The sermon form itself accounted for a huge proportion of the output of the press, and was sufficiently cheap to reach a massive audience.

Coleridge was only happy to be a lay preacher, however, and when on two occasions he considered accepting permanent positions as a Unitarian minister, he was exceedingly reluctant. On the first occasion in the latter half of 1796, he avoided the pulpit by moving close to Tom Poole in Nether Stowey, telling him 'I can accept no place in State, Church, or Dissenting Meeting. Nothing remains possible, but a School, or Writer to a Newspaper, or my present Plan'.[2] His 'present plan' was to become as self-sufficient as possible in his Stowey garden, write for the London journals, and take in a lodger and pupil (Charles Lloyd) that he had met whilst preaching.

A year later, however, towards the end of 1797, Estlin encouraged him to accept a

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[1] *CL* i. 349. To John Thelwall, 14 October, 1797.
[2] *CL* i. 274. 13 December 1796.

position in Shrewsbury, but as he confided to Thelwall, he was only considering it because of his straitened circumstances: 'I have neither money or influence - & I suppose, that at last I must become a Unitarian minister as a less evil than starvation – for I get nothing by literature'. He did, however, deliver a series of probationary sermons from the Shrewsbury pulpit in January 1798, immortalised by William Hazlitt, and was accepted by the congregation. Though the timely Wedgwood annuity enabled him to reject the post, in the months preceding Coleridge wrote a fascinating account of his tribulations over whether to take up the post.

In this chapter I will explore the paradox of Coleridge's esteemed reputation and facility as a preacher and his extreme reluctance to practise more than lay preaching. The chapter is in two sections. The first explores the nature of the Unitarian pulpit, and argues that the critical presentation of Unitarianism as a radical sect of Christianity has tended to place too much emphasis on the pulpit as a platform for political agitation. The second section examines Coleridge's experiences in the pulpit and suggests that he too misunderstood the character of dissent, expecting to find a greater degree of uniform support for his religious ideas. Moreover, during the period in which he preached, his understanding of Christianity began to change dramatically from a rational system, to a scheme of redemption whose nature he could not fully appreciate through his intellect alone.

i. The Unitarian Pulpit

Late eighteenth century Unitarianism is generally approached by literary critics as a radical sect of Christianity, and Coleridge's involvement is understood to have fired

his own radical tendencies. There are good reasons for taking this view,[3] but in this section, I would like to argue that the radical identity of Unitarianism has often been unhelpfully overstated. Unitarians did indeed petition the government for reform, and most determinedly with regard to the repeal of the Test Acts, but Unitarianism involved primarily a religious rather than a political commitment. And although religious and political views were especially interrelated during this period, to be a Unitarian was not a synonym for being a political radical, even if there was a tendency for the public to think this.[4]

Robert Hole has argued that 'it is misleading to speak too definitely of a sect having a specific political position', adding that the extent to which 'rank-and-file members of a church shared their leaders' political theory is difficult to assess'.[5] These observations are particularly pertinent to Coleridge's experiences of Unitarianism. Once he had left Cambridge he was predominantly mixing with Unitarians who were leading congregations in worship and teaching in associated schools, rather than actively petitioning the government for reform, let alone fomenting radical activism. However, I would like to suggest that even leading Unitarians have tended to be portrayed as more radical than their activities support.[6] This can be seen by considering the inaugural moment in Unitarian worship, the establishing of the Essex Street Chapel by Theophilus Lindsey in 1774.

Lindsey was an Anglican minister for nearly twenty-eight years, having entered it

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[3] Priestman has commented, for example, that 'Unitarians were immensely influential in [...] leading radical middle-class opposition to the government' (*Romantic Atheism*, p.8).
[4] See chapter two.
[5] Hole also quotes J.E. Bradley who has argued that 'nonconformity in general was much less radical than the study of its leadership has suggested'. Cf. *Pulpit and Politics*, p22 &n.
[6] Unitarians were not, in general, anti-establishment figures as one critic has pointed out: 'It is of cardinal importance to recognize that the Unitarian ministers of the latter part of the century included some of the leading intellectuals of the day, and [...] seven of their ministers towards the close of the century were Fellows of the Royal Society of London, among whom the pre-eminent were Priestley, Price, Chandler, Kippis, and Walker'. Cf. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.78.

'out of a free and deliberate choice, and with an earnest desire to promote the great ends of it.'[7] Having 'been educated in the established church he did not at that time feel any scruples either concerning the use of the liturgy, or subscription to the articles.'[8] But for more than half of the period in which he preached in Anglican churches, Lindsey rejected the Trinity, and all theological doctrines that derived from a divine conception of Christ. By the end of the 1760s he was considering resigning his ministry, as was recorded by Priestley when the two men began a close friendship:

> He [Lindsey] soon discovered to me that he was uneasy in his situation, and had thoughts of quitting it. At first I was not forward to encourage him in it, but rather advised him to make what alteration he thought proper in the offices of the church, and leave it to his superiors to dismiss him if they chose.[9]

Lindsey, however, wanted reform of the Church and so joined the Feather's Tavern Association, along with a number of men from Jesus College.[10] Their efforts failed, however, and Lindsey turned from the Church to establish a form of worship in line with his opinions and conscience; and in Priestley's words 'to occasion a new era in the history of religion in this country'.[11]

In his *Farewell Address to the Parishioners of Catterick* (1774), Lindsey makes it clear that he does not wish to lead others to reject the Church unless their conscience should oblige them to do so.[12] He explains that his own decision to leave is because he cannot lead the devotions of a congregation in services that he does not believe to be based on scripture:

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[7] *Lindsey Letters*, p.4.
[8] Ibid., p.5.
[9] *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, p.97.
[10] For the Feather's Tavern Association see the Appendix: Unitarianism and the Test Acts.
[11] *Autobiography of Joseph Priestley*, pp.97-8.
[12] Theophilus Lindsey, *A Farewell Address to the Parishioners of Catterick* (London: J. Johnson, 1774). Hereafter *Farewell Address*.

> I cannot approve, or offer up such prayers myself; or authorize them to be offered up by another for me. The case is different with regard to you, who have no authority in the church, who are only hearers, and do not lead the devotions of others. If you should disapprove of any part of the service which you hear, you can pass it over, and not join in it: but your minister, by reading it, makes it more his own. (*Farewell Address*, p.11)

He does encourage them to hope for reform of the Book of Common Prayer, but the terms in which he does this are far from inflammatory, addressing the monarchy and government with reverence:

> Be ready at all times, and even desirous to have the common-prayer book reformed, and the public worship of God in it made more conformable to the holy scriptures, for your own sakes, and that of your conscientious Pastors, whenever it shall please God, in his providence, to incline our gracious Prince and Parliament to set about so needful a work. (*Farewell Address*, p.22)

On leaving Catterick, Lindsey moved to London and 'by the exertions of the late Mr. Joseph Johnson, of St. Paul's Churchyard, a room was soon found and taken in Essex House, Essex Street, which [...] might, at a moderate expense be fitted up as a temporary chapel.'[13] This 'moderate expense' was gathered largely through the efforts of Priestley and Dr. Richard Price.[14] Thus on April 17, 1774 Lindsey preached an inaugural sermon in the chapel on Essex Street in the Strand, where he would continue to preach for nearly thirty years.[15]

Lindsey intended to base his form of worship on the plan for a reformed liturgy put forward by one of the key figures among the Latitudinarians Samuel Clarke (1675-1729). Clarke represented an eminent Anglican who attempted to reform the Church but did not wish to dismember the body of Christianity. Accordingly, the title-page of Lindsey's sermon quotes from Clarke's *Sermons* to this effect:

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[13] *Memoirs of Lindsey*, pp.63-4.
[14] *Memoirs of Lindsey*, p.64.
[15] Theophilus Lindsey, *A sermon preached at the opening of the chapel in Essex-House, Essex-Street, in the Strand, on Sunday, April 17, 1774 by Theophilus Lindsey*, 2nd edn (London: J. Johnson, 1774); hereafter *Inaugural Sermon*. The Essex Street Chapel has remained the centre of English Unitarianism since.

> The true unity of Christians consists not in *unity of opinion* in the bond of *ignorance*, or *unity of practice* in the bond of *hypocrisy*, but in the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. (*Inaugural Sermon*, p.3)

This quote is itself based on the epistle to the Ephesians (one of the principal texts for Lindsey's sermon), in which St. Paul beseeches his readers to walk,

> With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Eph. 4.4-6)

Lindsey's interpretation of this calling, like Clarke's, enables him to find unity even where there is diversity of opinion and practice:

> The exhortation of St. Paul before us, relates primarily and more immediately to the Ephesian Converts to whom he addresses it. But it is no less suited to all others, who in their respective circumstances are to endeavour *to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*
> *The unity of the Spirit*, as appeareth from the context; was the kindness and harmony amongst Christians, their just deference for each other, and regard for the common good, at that time, *when Believers were very generally favoured with extraordinary gifts of the holy Spirit*. And since those miraculous powers have been withdrawn, which happened very soon, *the unity of the Spirit*, is the kind affection, good order, and attention to mutual edification, which ought to subsist among those who profess the doctrine of Christ *which was dictated by the same holy Spirit of God*. (*Inaugural Sermon*, p.6)

Lindsey draws on St. Paul's analogy of the church in Christ's body by arguing that this necessarily implies 'divers members':[16]

> All Christians are equal, and upon a level in the things that concern their salvation. No one is to dictate with authority to another. For they are all *One body*, as it were; consisting indeed of *divers members*. [...] but no one *head*, or Lord of another: all under the direction of *One Spirit, one rule of faith*, and *one Lord* Jesus Christ, the author of that faith, and dispenser of that spirit and power of God and *head of his body*, the

[16] Eph 1. 22-3, 'the head over all things to the church, which is his body'

> church; himself subordinate to, and receiving all his powers from the One God and Father of all. (*Inaugural Sermon*, p.8)

Thus, Lindsey offers scriptural support not only for his decision to establish his own form of worship, but also for his objection to any other authority than Christ's in matters of 'salvation'. Lindsey argues that the Bible neither supports the Church's claim to authority nor the doctrines it enforces, and in fact considers New Testament to preach only one 'fundamental point of faith':

> We shall in vain search the New Testament for fundamental points of faith, one only excepted, the belief of which is indeed necessary for every Christian; namely, that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.* Without this no one can be a Christian. And he that sincerely believes this, will believe and do every thing else, that Jesus taught and commanded. Our Saviour and his apostles, tell us not any thing of that long catalogue of other necessary articles of faith, commonly insisted on. These are generally, either misapplications of holy scripture ill understood; or obscure, uncertain deductions from it. (*Inaugural Sermon*, pp.11-2)

Lindsey's criticism of the Church is relatively mild here, presenting their articles of faith as having an 'obscure' or 'uncertain' relationship with the scriptures. It is this diplomacy that made Lindsey suitable to lead a dissenting congregation, especially given that for the whole period of his ministry, he did not obtain a license as required of him by the Toleration Act of 1689. It is likely that Lindsey's reserve was partly that he had ministered for so long within the Church, and had initially wished for it to reform into an institution that would tolerate individualistic belief and practice. But a more fundamental principle is that he did not wish to see the Church brought down because he felt diversity should not only be permitted (for the Church had the right to worship as it chose), but was in fact 'an honour and of singular service to' religion. His objection was to one sect (i.e. the Church) dictating what all others ought to believe and practice, and which he saw as against the 'appointment of God':

> This, I say, plainly appears to be the appointment of God, however many have been led away to think and act as if it were not so. [...] In this sort, different sects, and churches, or worshipping societies of Christians would be formed: all professing to follow the same rule of holy scripture; but following it in different ways according to their own apprehensions. Each would possess a right of adhering to their own sentiments, and method of worshipping God, without control, so long as they did not disturb the public peace. And in the midst of these differences and varieties, the unity of the Spirit was still to be kept in the bond of peace; by a brotherly affection, and friendly correspondence one with another.
>
> While this friendly benevolent temper is cultivated towards each other, the different sects and churches amongst Christians, far from being a hurt or discredit to religion, are an honour and of singular service to it. (*Inaugural Sermon*, p.14)

It is important to notice in this extract that Lindsey supports diverse worship so long as it does not 'disturb the public peace'. Lindsey was keenly aware of the troubling identification between seventeenth and eighteenth century religious dissent. One critic has describes this as follows:

> The History of English Protestant Dissent in the eighteenth century is the history of a losing battle against tradition. [...] Protestant Dissenters were remembered and condemned as sectaries and king-killers. Their every activity, however consonant with the intellectual fashion and tastes of their times, was rigidly scrutinized and interpreted in the light of the past. [Dissenters were seen as] a congenitally perverse race whom no discipline could chasten.[17]

Lindsey, therefore, attempts to distinguish religious liberty from the social unrest that historically has attended it:

> Nor can it with truth be said, though it often hath been said, that different sects of religion in a country, have a tendency to disturb the public peace and quiet. On the contrary, as far as they conduce to make men better Christians, which they do in a great degree, they contribute to make them more useful and peaceable members of society. [...] Let those rather bear the blame, the civil powers, the princes and states of this world, who have given life and importance to these disputes, that would otherwise have died away of themselves, by interfering with them: who instead of affording protection to all the parties have lent their aid to one to molest and destroy the other: who for ends of ambition and lawless power, have courted the most numerous and powerful sects in their respective countries, pouring in wealth, and honours, and authority upon them, whilst they have generally deprived the inferior number of fortunes, and life, and liberty more precious than life. (*Inaugural Sermon*, p.18-19)

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[17] Anthony Lincoln, *Some Political & Social Ideas of English Dissent: 1763-1800* (New York: Octagon, 1938; repr. 1971), pp.4-5.

This is a strong as Lindsey's criticism of the State gets. But whilst Lindsey is pointing the finger at the State for social unrest in the name of religious difference, he talks generally of '*a* country', and, 'the civil powers, the princes and states of this world'. Towards the end of the sermon Lindsey pledges that 'far will it be from my purpose ever to treat of controversial matters from this place.'[18] Even so, Lindsey's letters from the period convey the suspicion with which his enterprise was held: 'for some time a Government agent attended the services, but ceased to do so upon failing to discover that the preaching of Unitarian doctrine was not another name for obnoxious political propaganda.'[19]

Essentially, Lindsey's intention for the Essex Chapel was to institutionalize 'a more scriptural form of worship'[20] and so the State was only important to him insofar as it prevented a return to scripture, free from enforced interpretation. Privately his views were politically radical, and he belonged, with many London radicals, to the 'Society for Commemorating the Revolution in France'. But his purpose in establishing the Essex Street Chapel, was religious rather than political. He asks his congregation,

> To watch over one another, and to excite unto love and to good works; that we may be the salt of the earth; lights of the world; and that our light may shine before men that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven.
> This end, we have, my brethren, in common with all christian societies; and this is the most important end of all, and principally to be regarded.[21]

Had he been permitted to preach his own theological views within the Church of England, he would not have sought to leave it. But the dictates of his conscience and the legislature that dictated the orthodox form of worship, set him against the Church

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[18] *Ibid.* p.21.
[19] *Letters of Lindsey,* p.22.
[20] *Ibid.* p.29.
[21] *Ibid.* p.22.

and obliged him to gain notoriety that he did not seek.

The case against radical Unitarianism may be overstated however. Indeed, as discussed in chapter two Priestley's claim to have 'never preached a political sermon in my life' is difficult to take seriously.[22] But it is important also to recognise the conservatism inherent in Unitarianism. This is principally for two reasons: firstly there was a high proportion of ex- Anglicans turning to Unitarianism; secondly they were devoted to rational discourse, making them less susceptible to the enthusiasm and fanaticism of political radicalism. Indeed one critic has pointed out that their concern for rationalism restricted the appeal of Unitarian sermons: 'Both critical Unitarians and their opponents maintained that the doctrines preached in Unitarian chapels were too intellectual and too cold to move the hearts of most Englishmen'.[23]

It will be clear from the discussion of Estlin's sermons in chapter three that he tended towards conservative Unitarianism. Cottle gives a further indication of this, writing that it was not 'practicable' for Coleridge to begin preaching from pulpits in Bristol on account of 'the conspicuous stand he had taken in free politics, through the medium of his numerous lectures.'[24] Accordingly his inaugural discourse was to be in Bath from the pulpit of the Rev. David Jardine in the Trim Street chapel in Bath. Jardine appears to have been no more radically inclined than Estlin.

Something of the character of Jardine's pulpit may be discerned from his collection of sermons gathered by Estlin. They display a scholarly attention to the scriptural context of any texts chosen for each sermon, as well as setting the scriptures themselves into their cultural context. But predominant throughout, however, is a spirit of conciliation, tolerance, and non-controversiality. One sermon, for example, is based on Isaiah's prophecy of the 'prince of peace', a popular text among Unitarians

[22] Cf. *Present State of Europe*, p.xi.
[23] *Dissenters*, p.90.
[24] *Cottle*, p.93.

in the 1790s. For Gilbert Wakefield, this text was the occasion for a damning contrast between the 'spirit of Christianity' and the 'spirit of the times in Great Britain'. Jardine, however, begins by advising caution in reading the Bible, drawing attention to the vast differences between 'ancient ages' and 'modern times':

> It cannot well be too often repeated, that the bible is a very figurative book, perhaps one of the most figurative extant. Its contents were written in a remote eastern country, in which the most bold metaphors, the most stately imagery were used; and probably the many errors into which Christians have fallen respecting its doctrines, have arisen in some measure, from interpreting it too literally; from considering its allegories as realities, and its figures as unadorned truth. [...]
> Let us, however, read our bibles more wisely. Let us make proper allowance for the different idioms of different languages; for the difference between the hyperbolical style of eastern countries and ancient ages, and the plain diction of this part of the world, and of modern times. (*Jardine Sermons*, p.158)

Clearly this caution in mapping the biblical narratives onto contemporary history is dramatically different to Priestley's approach exemplified by his sermon the *Present State of Europe*. This difference is further seen in Jardine's interpretation of the kingdom of God:

> The nature of this kingdom, Jesus Christ during the term of his ministry, takes peculiar pains to explain. He calls it *the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Heaven, his own kingdom, the kingdom of Christ,* or *of the Messiah*. He tells us, 'his kingdom was not of this world,' but purely of a spiritual nature, not to be propagated by the powers of earth, by fire and sword; but by signs and wonders which God did by him, by the shining evidence of truth, and the providence of its divine author. Its great object was to make men wise, good, and happy, here and for ever. It should gradually be established in the world. (*Jardine Sermons*, pp.160-2)

The idea of a gradual reform of the world is somewhat closer to Coleridge's model of the moral regeneration of society, than to Priestley's sense of impending renewal. However, Jardine is quite unlike Coleridge in his toleration, and even embrace of, contrary opinions, including those of unbelievers:

> Were men to be generally convinced that excellence consisted only in moral and intellectual improvement, such characters would no longer disgrace the christian name and profession.
>
> *The general reception of this sentiment, also, will tend to produce a calm discussion of theological truth.*
>
> Men will not interrupt the debate by hurling their anathemas, and predicting the divine vengeance against unbelievers; but in the language of the apostle, they will be 'striving together for the faith of the gospel.' Persons of different opinions will love each other as brethren, and the virtuous image of Jesus, if seen even in the person who is ignorant of his divine mission, will secure the affection of his benevolent disciples. (*Jardine Sermons*, pp.194-5)

This then is the context in which Coleridge would begin to preach.

ii. 'An Hireless Priest'[25]

Cottle recalls that Coleridge's first performance from a pulpit took place in early 1796, but this dating is problematic if his assessment of the quality of the performance is to be taken at face value. For Cottle's account is that the experience was tedious and embarrassing, which is a striking contrast to the responses he would begin to receive on his Watchman Tour which started on the 9 January of the same year. The Bath sermon might have been delivered in the first week of the year, and Cottle's account may be partially accurate, but it would be a remarkable improvement in Coleridge's pulpit manner in a short space of time, if it were so.[26]

When Cottle, Coleridge, and Charles Danvers[27] arrived at the chapel in Trim St, it was apparently 'the most meagre congregation' Cottle had ever seen. In spite of this, he described himself and his party as 'half fearful whether in his impetuous current of feeling' Coleridge would use the sermon to preach sedition and suffer the same fate as

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[25] *CL* i. 255.

[26] No records for the Trim Street Chapel exist until 1837, and so the date cannot be checked. My thanks to Tom Mayberry for this (lack of) information.

[27] Charles Danvers was a friend of Jardine and Estlin. Coleridge wrote of him, 'when I regarded Southey's as a *colossal* Virtue, even then I thought Charles Danvers the spirit of Southey made perfect.' (*CL* i 175: 10 Jan 1796).

the Rev. William Winterbotham.[28] However repetition rather than sedition was what Cottle claims to have heard:

> Our fears were groundless. Strange as it may appear in Mr. Coleridge's vigorous mind, the whole discourse consisted of little more than a Lecture on the Corn Laws! which some time before he had delivered in Bristol, at the Assembly Room. (*Cottle*, p.95)

Coleridge apparently offered to deliver another sermon that evening, and to the amazement of Cottle, Jardine accepted his offer:

> What surprise will the reader feel, on understanding that, independently of ourselves and Mr. Jardine, there were but seventeen persons present, including men, women, and children! We had, as we expected, a recapitulation of the old lecture, with the exception of its humorous appendages, in reprobation of the Hair Powder Tax; and the twice-told tale, even to the ear of friendship, in truth sounded rather dull! *Cottle*, pp.95-6)

Cottle's reminiscences of the period are of course somewhat unreliable, partly because he did not publish them until after Coleridge's death, and more importantly, because he had something of a score to settle. The following humorous account, therefore, may well say more about Cottle's feelings nearly forty years later than it does about the actual sermon:[29]

> Two or three times Mr. C. looked significantly toward our seat, when fearful of being thrown off my guard into a smile, I held down my head, from which position I was aroused, when the sermon was about half over, by some gentleman throwing back the door of his pew, and walking out of the chapel. In a few minutes after, a second individual did the same; and soon after a third door flew open, and the listener escaped! At this moment affairs looked so very ominous, that we were almost afraid Mr. Jardine himself would fly, and that none but ourselves would fairly sit it out. [...]
> The conviction was so strong on my mind that Mr. C. had mistaken his talent, that my regard for him was too genuine to entertain the wish of ever again seeing him in a pulpit. (*Cottle*, pp.96-7)

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[28] Winterbotham 'had been sentenced in 1793 to two years' imprisonment and fined £100 on each of two indictments of having preached two seditious sermons. Priestley referred to the case in a sermon of 28 February 1794, which he printed later in the same year under the title of *The Present State of Europe*' (*LPR*, 348). Coleridge also refers to Winterbotham in *TW*, 211.

[29] On Cottle's grievances, see *TW*, xxx-i.

1.

Trim Street Chapel, Bath.

Coleridge preached here in 1795. Cottle recorded this as an inauspicious beginning to Coleridge's ministry: 'The conviction was so strong on my mind that Mr. C. had mistaken his talent, that my regard for him was too genuine to entertain the wish of ever again seeing him in a pulpit.'

2.

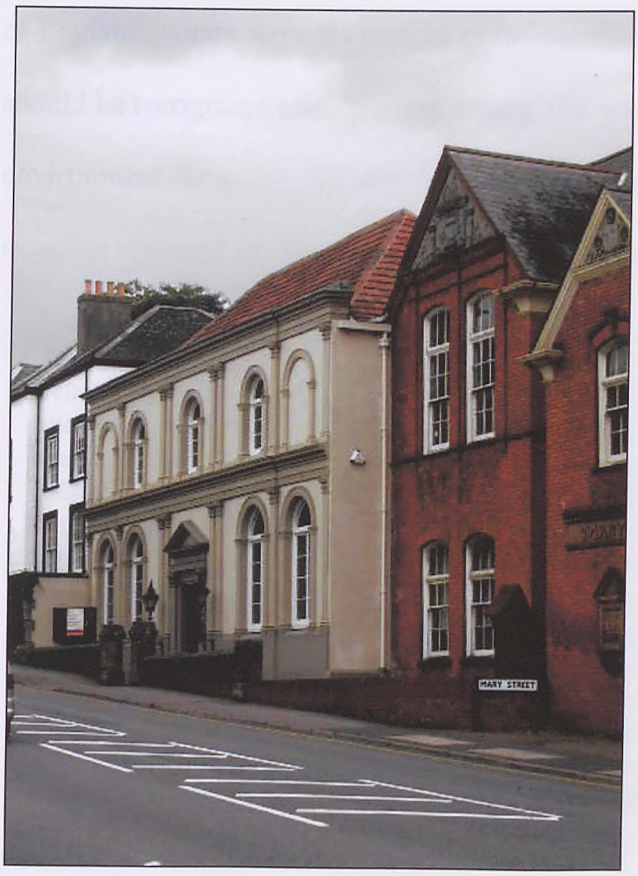
Lewin's Mead, Bristol.

Due to Coleridge's 'political notoriety', he never preached at John Prior Estlin's chapel. Estlin was a moderate man who advocated preaching 'with meekness and fear – or with mildness and diffidence, in opposition to a petulant, dogmatical, and conceited spirit'.

3.

Shrewsbury Unitarian Church.

Two years after Coleridge's sermon in Bath, Hazlitt would respond rather more positively than Cottle had: 'I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together, Truth and Genius had embraced, under the eye and with the sanction of Religion.'



4.

Mary Street Chapel, Taunton.

On turning down the Shrewsbury ministry, Coleridge tried to reassure Estlin that it did not signify the end of his Unitarian ministry, by pledging to preach in Taunton (Toulmin's chapel) and Bridgewater: 'I most assuredly shall preach often – and it is my present purpose alternatively to assist Dr Toulmin & Mr Howel, one part of every Sunday, while I stay at Stowey.'

If Cottle's account is a true reflection of how the sermons went, and his dating is correctly remembered, then Coleridge made a remarkable improvement to his pulpit manner within a matter of days. He began his tour of the midlands and north country on 9th January, on the he would preach to 'fourteen hundred persons', and the one extant sermon from the period, delivered at the High Pavement Chapel in Nottingham on 31st January, does not bear resemblance to the dreary effort Cottle apparently witnessed.

It is not clear exactly who the 'sundry Philanthropists and Anti-polemists' were, that Coleridge met in the Rummer Tavern to discuss *The Watchman*.[30] It seems likely, however, that they were Bristol businessmen, and the group certainly included Josiah Wade 'who had agreed to help advertise *The Watchman* in Bristol and London and who became Coleridge's financial backer'.[31] The tour, between 9 January and 13 February, would take Coleridge to the key industrial cities in the Midlands and North of England, which were the centres of radicalism and dissent outside of the capital. It should be recognised that, in some senses, this was a profoundly inappropriate environment for a man of Coleridge's political views. Coleridge had extremely negative opinions of cities as he makes clear in the extant sermon:

> When Towns and Cities were built, and the accumulative system had introduced more enormous Inequality with its accompanying Vices and miseries then the Depravity of the Heart spread a darkness over the understanding, and the Fears and the Appetites of mankind distorted the simple faith of Nature into the grossest and most malignant Superstition. Reasoning from ourselves up to Deity we ever attribute to him our own feelings. In rural scenes, Love and Power are everywhere conspicuous and by degrees we become partakers of that which we are accustomed to contemplate. The Beautiful and the Good of Creation are miniatured on our Hearts, as the surrounding Landscape on a convex mirror. But in Cities, the sights of Misery constantly obtruding will insinuate doubts of providential benevolence and veneration to weak and wicked men, because they are great and wealthy, will find a diminished difficulty in believing the Deity to be capricious or malignant. The uncorrupted Shepherd's Belief of God originated in the incessant perception of his benevolence – the Religion of the

[30] *BL* i. 179.
[31] *Early Visions*, p.108.

> succeeding Generations in Terror and the Hopes of averting supposed malignity. Thus Wretchedness and Tyranny assisted to corrupt Religion, and corrupted Religion *aids* and *confirms* Tyranny and Wretchedness. (*LPR*, 350)

It is difficult to imagine what a congregation of city-dwelling dissenting Christians would have made of this. 'Towns and Cities' bring about vice, misery, depravity, and spread 'darkness over the understanding'. The 'great and wealthy' are condemned as 'weak and wicked', and generally city-dwellers, Coleridge argues, are more likely to tend towards irreligion. The image of the convex mirror also suggests a necessary connection between the heart of the people and their environment. Indeed Coleridge appears more concerned that the 'sights of Misery' will endanger the capacity to believe in a benevolent Deity than in the miserable themselves. He wishes for a controlled and beautiful environment so as to supply evidence to support belief in the God. *The Watchman* itself, however, does not press home Coleridge's agrarian vision, but it is difficult to see how these sentiments would appeal to the people of the towns and cities, many of whom probably did not have the option of retiring into the good and benevolent countryside.[32] Indeed, as will be seen, Coleridge could barely sustain himself in retirement.

If Coleridge did seriously misjudge his audience in this, it may well be a symptom of a more general naivety regarding the appeal of his religious apologetics and the nature of his audience. His first stop was Worcester where he reckoned there to be no hope of finding subscribers because 'the Aristocrats are so numerous and the influence of the Clergy so extensive'.[33] On the coach journey to Worcester, however, Coleridge struck up a conversation with 'Citizen Squelch-gut', who was 'a most violent Aristocrat, but a pleasant humorous Fellow in other respects, and remarkably well

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[32] Coleridge does, however, preach his agrarian vision in the extract from 'Religious Musings': 'the vast Family of Love, | Rais'd from the common earth by common toil, | Enjoy the equal produce' (*TW*, 67).
[33] *CL* i. 175.

informed in agricultural Science – so that the time passed pleasantly enough'.[34] Roe interprets this unexpectedly pleasant exchange as an emblem of the lack of uniformity Coleridge would find throughout the tour:

> Coleridge's agreeably mixed impression of the 'Aristocrat' foreshadows other complicated encounters on his tour, and in some ways also takes us to the heart of the problems confronting him in finding a readership for the Watchman. Aristocrats could prove pleasant, humorous, well-informed; some of the radicals he had set out to meet would prove cold, irritable, bigoted – and, worst of all, stubbornly reluctant to hand over a subscription. (*Watchman Tour*, p.37)

Indeed although Coleridge was well aware that Unitarianism was not a uniform sect – he had hoped to make Southey 'orthodox in the heterodoxy of Unitarianism', he told Dyer[35] – the dissenting chapels he would preach to on the tour would be even more heterodox. When he preached at the New Meeting in Birmingham on 17 January 1796, the congregation of the Rev. John Edwards, he addressed a 'society of *all* sorts – Arians, Trinitarians &c'.[36] On this occasion Coleridge broke with his habit of preaching 'in a blue coat and white waistcoat, that not a rag of the woman of Babylon might be seen on me'.[37] His reasons for this are interesting:

> With regard to the *gown* at Birmingham I suffered myself to be *overpersuaded* – first of all, my Sermon being of so political a tendency had I worn my blue Cloaths, it would have injured *Edwards* – they would have said, he had stuck a political Lecturer in his pulpit. (*CL* i. 180)

This apparent conservatism from a dissenting pulpit is all the more remarkable when it is considered that it was formerly the pulpit of Joseph Priestley. 'I must have

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[34] *CL* i. 175. 'In the political sense an "aristocrat" meant a defender of the established order' (*TW*, xxxiiin).
[35] *CL* i. 153.
[36] *CL* i. 180.
[37] *BL* i. 179. Roe notes that 'the change from black gown to blue suggests Coleridge casting around for an identity before the public, trying out different guises and voices while also insisting on a singularity of purpose. (*Watchman Tour*, p.39).

shocked a multitude of prejudices', Coleridge reported.[38]

If the extant sermon is representative of the pulpit performances, they were remarkably similar in content to the *Lectures* of the previous year, though in condensed form. Within a discourse that would have lasted perhaps between twenty and thirty minutes, Coleridge delivers the Design Argument as proof of God's existence; sketches the development of society and the origins of evil in urbanisation and the 'accumulative system'; summarises Christ's character and the purpose of his mission; derives proofs of the authenticity of the gospels from the miracles; mocks infidelity as unnatural and cold; and ends with an explication of 'preach the Gospel to the Poor', to encourage donations for a local charity school.

This material is more or less the contents of the first three of the *Lectures*, in some places the wording is identical. The delivery, however, was probably more animated, as is suggested by the opening, and a number of points at which he appears to have extemporised. The text for the sermon is taken from Peter's first epistle, 'for even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow his steps.' The sermon does not begin, however, by discussing the person of Christ, but by setting himself in temporal and spatial vastness:

> When Death shall have closed my eye-lids, must I then bid my last farewell to the streams whose murmurs have soothed me, to the fields and woodlands, where I have delighted to wander? Must yonder blue Region and all this goodly scene darken upon me and go out? Have I marked the ascent of causes and made the elements subject to my will? [Have] I felt the holy joys and more holy sorrows of affection. Have I moved and loved and reasoned and all this that I may at last be compressed into a Clod of the Valley? (*LPR*, 349)

This is a dramatic opening, in the first-person and setting himself in the context of his own death. One can imagine Coleridge gesturing to the congregation as he describes

[38] *CL* i. 180.

'all *this* goodly scene', and having brought the pleasant natural scenery to the minds of the congregation, there is some humour in the anti-climax of becoming a 'Clod of the Valley'.

There are three points in the sermon that suggest Coleridge intended to extemporise. The first occurs as the culmination of a passage describing the character of Christ, and which ends with a line from 'Religious Musings' ('Harp'd by Arch-angels when they sing of Mercy').[39] It seems likely that Coleridge would have quoted the whole of the 'person of Christ' section from the poem (ll.16-32). Later in the sermon, preparing his way to discourse on the value of education, and so raise support for the school, Coleridge states 'three general consequences of Ignorance'.[40] The first is somewhat (unintentionally) amusing, and reflects Coleridge's youthful habit of interpreting social problems as being rooted in a simple and singular cause:

> A man cannot be always labouring – he must have hours of relaxation – but our nature abhors vacancy – and it is Knowledge alone that makes leisure a blessing – our nature abhors vacancy – and to avoid the pains of it, the ignorant labourer flies to the ale-house to join in the obscene say and produce by poisonous liquors that tumult of the brain which supplies the place of ideas. By his drunkenness he weakens his Constitution, and exhausts his wages – his Wife and Children are exposed to all those numerous disorders which arise from cold and hunger – and it is possible that in times of natural dearth, almost a pestilence might have been the consequence. From the house of the idle drunkard the disease might spread thro' the whole lane, from the lane to the next street, from the street like a conflagration might run thro' the city. (*LPR*, 355)

This clearly resembles the 'Introductory Essay' to *The Watchman* in which the 'poor man's curiosity' obliges him to visit the ale-house to read the news.[41] Coleridge proposes that enthusiasm for liberty might take the place of 'spiritous liquors' in the essay, but in both cases, there is an implicit link between education and virtue, and an association between the latter and sobriety. Between delivering the sermon and

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[39] *LPR*, 352.
[40] *LPR*, 355.
[41] *TW*, 11. See chapter four.

publishing the essay, Coleridge would write to Edwards, describing the nervous pain that he could not cope with whilst sober: 'such has been my situation for this last fortnight—I have been obliged to take Laudanum almost every night'.[42]

The two other 'consequences of Ignorance' are described as follows:

> Secondly, Superstition
> Thirdly – political fanaticism. (*LPR*, 356)

The editors note that the spaces following this list show that here Coleridge 'clearly intended to extemporise'.[43] The presence of these gaps explains an otherwise confusing omission from the sermon: politics. Coleridge was promoting his political journal, and his letters written from the tour frequently boast of the political content of his sermons. On 18 January, for example, he wrote to Wade saying 'my sermons, (great part extempore) were *preciously peppered with Politics*'; and eleven days later told Edwards that 'the *Sacred* may eventually help off the *profane* – and my *Sermons* spread a sort of sanctity over my *Sedition*'.[44]

Coleridge's extemporisation, and indeed his use of poetry, in his sermons would have distinguished him from the typical Unitarian preacher. However, in one vital respect Coleridge's preaching was not successful: he could not raise a sufficient quantity of subscribers to fund the periodical. In his concluding 'Address to the Readers of the Watchman', Coleridge would candidly explain that it was not financially viable, and identified the principal reason for this as a failure to find a big enough audience:

> This is the last Number of the Watchman. – Henceforward I shall cease to cry the State

[42] *CL* i. 188.
[43] *LPR*, 346.
[44] *CL* i. 176 & 179.

> of the political Atmosphere. While I express my gratitude to those friends, who exerted themselves so liberally in the establishment of this Miscellany, I may reasonably be expected to assign some reason for relinquishing it thus abruptly. The reason is short and satisfactory – the Work does not pay its expences [sic.]. Part of my Subscribers have relinquished it because it did not contain sufficient original composition, and a still larger number, because it contained too much. (*TW*, 374)

This was published May 13 1796, but only a week before, he had written to Thomas Poole explaining his future plans now that *The Watchman* had failed. The first was to fund a research trip to Jena University by translating the complete works of Schiller. Whilst there he would 'study Chemistry & Anatomy, [and] bring over with me all the works of Semler & Michaelis, the German Theologians, & of Kant, the great German Metaphysician. On my return I would commence a School for 8 young men'.[45] The alternative plan was much less appealing to Coleridge:

> My second Plan is to become a Dissenting Parson & abjure Politics & carnal literature. Preaching for Hire is not right; because it must prove a strong temptation to continue to profess what I had ceased to believe, *if ever* maturer Judgment with wider & deeper reading should lessen or destroy my faith in Christianity. But tho' not right in itself, it may become right by the greater wrongness of the only Alternative – the remaining in neediness & Uncertainty. (*CL* i. 210)

His profound reluctance to become a dissenting parson may well have been influenced by an awareness of the diversity of dissenting congregations, gained whilst on the Watchman Tour. More generally he may have concluded also that Unitarianism was rather more conservative than the excitement of Frend's company had led him to expect a few years earlier. The above extract, however, includes an extraordinary comment that, I would argue, has a profoundly important bearing on Coleridge's reluctance to take to the pulpit. Considering that he had just completed his most intensive period of preaching, and having lectured over the previous year on the evidences of Christianity, it is a startling confession that he considers his faith in

[45] *CL* i. 209.

Christianity to be vulnerable to 'maturer Judgment [and] wider and deeper reading'. As I have argued in chapter three, the methodology that Coleridge essentially adopted from Priestley – 'I must become a Christian on the same principles that I believe the doctrine of Gravitation'[46] – is to make faith permanently susceptible to future developments in understanding. Until this letter, Coleridge had not hinted at his concern that faith is always conditional if based on demonstrations and evidences of Christianity.[47] Priestley neither seemed to recognise this, nor care, because he prioritised the practical in his system of Christianity, and simply failed to properly justify the need for his rational proofs altogether. Coleridge's awareness that his Christian apologetics made his faith conditional, must also have given him considerable pause for thought at the prospect of preaching regularly to a congregation that would look to him for spiritual guidance.

Poole's response to the above letter was characteristically supportive as Mrs Sandford has recorded:

> When the last number of the *Watchman* appeared, on May 13, 1796, he [Coleridge] must have been almost desperate, being either penniless or very nearly so, and entirely without any certain prospect of being otherwise. But even as early as March 28 [...] the plan had been communicated to a few of Coleridge's friends, and 'acted on,' says Tom Poole, 'by I think seven or eight,' and a small sum of £35 or £40 [...] was awaiting Coleridge's acceptance, and that in the honourable form of a testimonial, offered by his admiring friends, as a token of their esteem and appreciation. With the tender forethought and considerateness that belongs to real affection, Tom Poole contrived that the letter should be received on the very day on which the last number of the *Watchman* was issued. (*Poole and his Friends*, pp.87-8)

This support certainly helped Coleridge out of a tight spot, and must have flattered him also, but he still needed to generate more income, and over the ensuing six

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[46] *LPR*, 176.

[47] 'The Eolian Harp', to some extent, dramatises Coleridge's deeper concern for a faith based on feeling, thanksgiving, and gratitude, rather than philosophy. His more public voice such as that in 'Religious Musings' and the *Lectures*, however, smothers such subtleties.

months a number of options were considered.[48] For some time it seemed likely that Coleridge would move to Derby and act as tutor to the children of Mrs Elizabeth Evans, but the plan collapsed.[49] Having visited her, Coleridge made his way back to Bristol, stopping off in Birmingham to preach a sermon that he was very pleased with, as he told Estlin on 22 August, 1796:

> I preached yesterday morning [...]. 'Twas my chef d'oeuvre. I think of writing it down, & publishing it with two other sermons – one on the character of Christ, and another on his universal reign, from Isaiah XLV. 22 & 23.
> I should like you to hear me preach them. (*CL* i. 233)

Coleridge did not publish them, but his preaching on this occasion did lead to a temporary solution to his financial difficulties: 'Charles [Lloyd] had heard Coleridge preach and had fallen completely under his spell, and begged his father to obtain the pupilship at the extravagant fee of £80 per annum'.[50] On the basis of this income, and that from Poole and friends, Coleridge hatched a plan to retire to Nether Stowey with Sara and the newborn Hartley, where Lloyd would join them as lodger and pupil.

Lloyd's father, a rich Quaker banker, took some persuading, and evidently had criticised the plan as an unchristian retreat from active life. It must have touched a nerve in Coleridge, who had so recently rejected,

> The sluggard Pity's vision-weaving tribe!
> Who sigh for wretchedness, yet shun the wretched,
> Nursing in some delicious solitude
> Their slothful loves and dainty sympathies! (ll.56-9, *Keach*, p.93)

Coleridge's reply to Lloyd senior is a skilful piece of rhetoric in defence of retirement

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[48] His situation was a little helped when the 'Royal Literary Fund' made a donation of ten guineas (*CL* i. 220).
[49] Cf. *CL* i. 227.
[50] *Early Visions*, p.122.

as a Christian scheme, founded on 'general truths':[51]

> You think my scheme *monastic rather than Christian.* Can he be deemed monastic who is married, and employed in rearing his children? – who *personally* preaches the truth to his friends and neighbours, and who endeavours to instruct tho' Absent by the Press? In what line of Life could I be more *actively* employed? and what titles, that are dear and venerable, are there which I shall not possess,' God permit[ting] my present resolutions to be realised? Shall I not be an Agriculturalist, and Husband, a Father, and a *Priest* after the order of *Peace*? an *hireless* Priest? 'Christianity teaches us to let our lights shine before men.' It does so – but it likewise bids us say, Our Father, lead us not [into] temptation! which how can he say with a safe conscience who voluntarily places himself in those circumstances in which, if he believe Christ, he must acknowledge that it would be easier for a Camel to go thro' the eye of a needle than for HIM to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven? Does not that man *mock* God who daily prays against temptations, yet daily places himself in the midst of the most formidable? I meant to have written a few lines only respecting myself, because I have much and weighty matter to write concerning my friend, Charles Lloyd; but I have been seduced into many words from the importance of the general truths on which I build my conduct. (*CL* i. 255-6; 14 November 1796)

Considering that the Lloyd family was wealthy through banking, Coleridge is a little bold in his allusion to prospect of the 'rich man' entering the kingdom of heaven.[52] Coleridge's self-portrait, by contrast, is holy and meek, even suggesting that he was 'seduced' into devoting so much space to himself. He presents himself as engaging in daily prayer to avoid temptation, and the environment of the city – now even less appealing that he had a two-month old child – would be too risky for a man of Coleridge's fragile sensibility.

Coleridge was unusually sensitive to the environment about him. The Pantisocracy was based on the idea of creating an ideal environment that would necessarily lead to virtue, by excluding all vestiges of contemporary English society. Rather as Coleridge had imbued the Ministries with the chief responsibility for the presence of

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[51] Dissenters tended to favour an active and engaged approach to society. Priestley, for example, had written *An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life* (1765) in which he laments 'a defect in our present system of public education that a proper course of studies is not provided for gentlemen who are designed to fill the principal stations of active life, distinct from those which are adapted to the learned profession' (*Priestley's Writings*, p.285). The penultimate discourse of his *Corruptions of Christianity* (1782) is concerned with the 'History of the Monastic Life', in which he condemns monasticism as a withdrawal from Christian duty (*Rutt* v. 378ff).

[52] Cf. Mt.19.24 & Mk.10.25.

vice in society, so he imbued particular environments with a moral character, distinguishing good and bad as the country and the city, for example. Coleridge's sensitivity to his environment was, in certain respects, a struggle to integrate his ideas of religion with the world in which he lived.[53] This is particularly notable in his comments on 'preaching for hire'.

In his notes to 'Religious Musings', Coleridge described the word 'Priest' as 'a name, after which any other term of abhorrence would appear an anti-climax'.[54] The key issue is the combination of the gospels and money:

> I deem that the teaching of the gospel for hire is wrong; because it gives the teacher an improper bias in favor [sic.] of particular opinions on a subject where it is of the last importance that the mind should be perfectly unbiased. Such is my private opinion; but I mean not to censure all hired teachers, many among whom I know, and venerate as the best and wisest of men. [...] By a Priest I mean a man who holding the scourge of power in his right hand and a bible (translated by authority) in his left, doth necessarily cause the bible and the scourge to be associated ideas, and so produces that temper of mind that leads to Infidelity. (*1796*, pp.171-2)

In consequence of this uncompromising position Coleridge wished to remain a lay preacher, or 'hireless priest' as he described himself to Lloyd senior. But although Coleridge's low estimate of the Church at this time in some ways accounts for his views on preaching for hire, it is extraordinary that a man of Coleridge's intellectual vigour should consider himself so unable to resist the pressure to conform to the religious expectations of a regional congregation.[55]

It is even more difficult to credit his reluctance to preach for hire in dissenting chapels. Unitarians consistently championed free inquiry and when, a year later, he

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[53] See chapter six, part two, in which I discuss Coleridge's later distinction between the earthly and the Ideal Church.

[54] *1796*, p.172.

[55] Edward E. Bostetter has argued that 'at no time in his life was Coleridge at ease in his intellectual speculations; even in the days of greatest revolutionary fervour he sought to reconcile his republican doctrine with traditional Christian dogma, as in 'Religious Musings'.' Cf. 'The Nightmare World of "The Ancient Mariner"', in *Coleridge: The Ancient Mariner and Other Poems*, eds. Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1973), 184-99 (p.194).

was forced to consider going against his principles by accepting a position at Shrewsbury, Coleridge himself drew attention to the minimal theology of Unitarianism, in a letter to Josiah Wedgwood:

> The *necessary* creed in our sect is but short—it will be necessary for me, in order to my continuance as an Unitarian Minister, to believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah—in all other points I may play off my intellect *ad libitum*. (*CL* i. 366; 5 January, 1798)

Whilst his fear of the intellectual restrictions of such a position is a little precious, it does point to a profound concern in Coleridge to alter his ideas without any impediment whatsoever. His letter to Wedgwood suggests another reason for fearing the intellectual restraints of the position: 'the routine of Duty brings on a certain sectarian mannerism, which generally narrows the Intellect itself, and always narrow the sphere of its operation'.[56] Indeed for a man who at twenty-three was beginning to acquire a reputation of national standing, and who had attempted to make everybody free by disseminating the 'truth', the idea of settling down two years later to the routine of a parson's life can not have appealed.

Another strain in Coleridge's Christianity had been developing, however, that would have attracted him to regular worship, but not perhaps as a preacher. In July 1797, whilst still suffering from a scalded foot that had imprisoned him in Tom Poole's lime-tree bower, Coleridge wrote to Estlin describing an approach to Christianity dramatically different from the 'evidences' he had been consumed with in the previous years. 'I judge so much by the *fruits*', he explained, suggesting that it diminishes the importance of the intellect as a basis for belief. His illustration of this – 'the sacramental Rites' – suggests that his experiences as a minister had contributed to this position:

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[56] *CL* i. 366.

> Now all this applies to the present case. I cannot as yet reconcile my intellect to the sacramental Rites; but as I do not see any ill-effect which they produce among the Dissenters, and as you declare from your own experience that they have *good* effects, it is painful to me even simply to *state my dissent* – and more than this I have not done, and, unless Christianity were attacked on this head by an Infidel of real learning & talents, more than this I do not consider myself as bound to do. – I never even state my dissent unless to Ministers who urge me to undertake the ministry. – My conduct is this – I omit the rites, – and wish to say nothing about it – every thing that relates to Christianity is of importance; and when the Incendiaries have surrounded the building, it is idle to dispute among ourselves whether an odd Stair-case was placed in it by the original Architect, or added afterwards by a meaner Hand. (*CL* i. 337)

The final comments are clearly indicative of Coleridge moving towards a wholesale acceptance of Anglican Christianity. He is not assessing doctrine or rite by the enlightenment measure of reason, but by a faith based on a growing sense of need, and meaning rooted in experience rather than understanding; he is beginning to see Christianity as a 'scheme of redemption'.[57] Coleridge would go on in this letter to state that he is unable to perform or receive the 'Lord's supper', however, which is clearly a problem for someone considering becoming a minister.

Coleridge's letters in the first half of 1798 offer a fascinating insight into shifts of emphasis in his Christianity, towards practise rather than defence or apology. In one letter written in May to Estlin, for example, Coleridge suggests that accepting the Shrewsbury ministry might have helped to stabilise him, and fortify his 'spiritual health' that was not assisted by his intellectual approach to Christianity:

> I have been too neglectful of practical religion – I mean, actual & stated prayer, & a regular perusal of scripture as a morning and evening duty! May God grant me grace to amend this error; for it is a grievous one! – Conscious of frailty I almost wish (I say it confidentially to you) that I had become a stated Minister: for indeed I find true joy after

[57] *CN* i. 3803. See also his letter to George Fricker of October 1806 in which Coleridge articulates the basis on his faith in terms only adumbrated in the letter to Estlin above: 'With the grace of the spirit consult your own heart, in quietness and humility, they will furnish you with proofs, that surpass all understanding, because they are felt and known; believe all these I say, so as that thy faith shall be not merely real in the acquiescence of the intellect; but actual, in the thereto assimilated affections; then shalt thou know from God, whether or not Christ be of God.' (*CL* ii. 1190).

> a sincere prayer; but for want of habit my mind wanders, and I cannot *pray* as often as I ought. Thanksgiving is pleasant in the performance; but prayer & distinct confession I find most serviceable to my spiritual health when I can do it. But tho' all my doubts are done away, tho' Christianity is my *Passion*, it is too much my *intellectual* Passion: and therefore will do me but little good in the hour of temptation & calamity. (*CL* i. 407)

'Practical religion' would never replace Coleridge's intellectual appetite for Christianity, however, but the growing awareness of his *need* for faith rather than viewing it as the inevitable product of considering the evidence, may well have disinclined him to lead a congregation of rational dissenters.

Whilst this letter suggests that Coleridge had been seriously attracted to becoming a minister, it is difficult to imagine that he would have been either happy in the role, or suited to it. Whilst the pulpit might have suited Coleridge's desire to preach, to instruct, to lecture, and to inspire with extracts from scripture or his own poetry, a minister would be required to conduct an entire service, support the congregation pastorally, and appeal to a broad range of people. Coleridge knew, only too well, how volatile his character was, how susceptible to illness, and subject to dramatic swings of mood. These latter aspects of the role were not suited to Coleridge, and though he never expressed reluctance to preach on these grounds, it seems unlikely that he would not have felt concerned that his character was not suited to the routine.

Indeed Coleridge regarded himself to have a higher calling, as did a number of those who knew him. Poole, for example, rejected the suggestion that Coleridge 'may be of more use in promoting Christianity as a minister than as a private man', and instead portrayed him as being enabled to speak to 'mankind' rather than just one congregation:

> You don't think Christianity more pure by coming from the mouth or pen of an hired man? You are not shackled. Your independence of mind is *part of the bond* [i.e. the Wedgwood annuity]. You are to give to mankind that which you think they most want. Religion, if you please, may be, as it will be, the basis of your moral writings – it may

> shine in your lighter productions, inspire and purify your poetry. You may, if you please, occasionally preach, and these occasional addresses are heard with the attention which novelty, as the world is, always excites, and, being gratuitous, possess the aid of disinterestedness on your part. (*Poole and his Friends*, p.142)

This letter was written prior to Coleridge's decision to accept the annuity, but once he had done so, he wrote to Isaac Wood (who had invited Coleridge to take the Shrewsbury ministry), and presented his rejection along similar lines to Poole:

> I have an humble trust, that many years will not pass over my head before I shall have given proof in some way or other that active zeal for Unitarian Christianity, not indolence or indifference, has been the motive of my declining a local and stated settlement as preacher of it. My friends Mr. Howell and Dr. Toulmin are both in the descent of life, and both at a small distance from me; and it is my purpose to relieve one or the other every Sunday. (*CL* i. 377)

The evidence of Coleridge's letters and Hazlitt's account of staying with Coleridge in *My First Acquaintance with Poets* suggests that Coleridge kept his promise to continue lay preaching in Somerset. Hazlitt recalls such an occasion a few days after arriving at Nether Stowey – hence in late May 1798 – and Coleridge would appear to be quite comfortable with the prospect:

> It was a Sunday morning, and he was to preach that day for Dr. Toulmin of Taunton. I asked him if he had prepared any thing for the occasion? He said he had not even thought of the text, but should as soon as we parted.[58]

The performances in Somerset were, however, the last vestiges of his Unitarianism. By this time he had already decided to leave the country for Germany, and during this period he would enter a period he later described as 'negative Unitarianism'.[59] The concluding chapter of this thesis will explore the final phase of Coleridge's dissenting ministry, during which the emphasis falls on Nature as minister, and the 'cause of

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[58] Quoted in *Interviews and Recollections*, p.67.
[59] *CL* ii 821.

religion' is continued primarily in his poetry.

6

'The Most Assiduous of Her Ministers'[1]

From Dissenting Ministry to Nature's Ministry

When Wordsworth heard that Coleridge had accepted the Wedgwood annuity, his response was a little cautious: 'I hope the fruit will be good as the seed is noble'.[2] Wordsworth was perhaps unaware at the time that in many respects, the fruit would be his own writing. The scale of the projected philosophical poem *The Recluse*, as Wordsworth described it in a letter to James Tobin, bears the hallmarks of a Coleridgean scheme:

> I have written 1300 lines of a poem in which I contrive to convey most of the knowledge of which I am possessed. My object is to give pictures of Nature, Man, and Society. Indeed I know not anything which will not come within the scope of my plan.[3]

As Stephen Gill has commented, 'the grandeur of the conception, the confidence hardly warranted by actual achievement so far, all reveal how completely Wordsworth had entered into Coleridge's vision'.[4] Despite the mixed blessing that Coleridge's encouragement for *The Recluse* turned out to be, in 1798 the men certainly felt themselves united on a single cause. Wordsworth would recall this in *The Prelude*:

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[1] 1.64, ii, *The Prelude* (1850). Wordsworth, William, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and S. Gill (London: Norton, 1979), p.91. All references to *The Prelude* in this chapter are to the 1850 version.

[2] *CL* i. 377n.

[3] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Earnest De Selincourt, 2nd edn, rev. by various, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-1988), i. p.212.

[4] Gill, Stephen, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p144. For a detailed discussion of *The Recluse* as 'originating in his [Coleridge's] wish to generate an "Answer to Godwin"', see Nicola Trott, 'The Coleridge Circle and the "Answer to Godwin"', *RES*, 16 (1990), 212-29.

> Thou, my Friend! Wert reared
> In the great city, 'mid far other scenes;
> But we, by different roads, at length have gained
> The self-same bourne. [...]
> ... For thou hast sought
> The truth in solitude, and, since the days
> That gave thee liberty, full long desired,
> To serve in Nature's temple, thou hast been
> The most assiduous of her ministers;
> In many things my brother, chiefly here
> In this our deep devotion. (ll.451-66, ii)

This passage reflects a dramatic change of focus in Coleridge's ministry from revealed religion to natural religion. Indeed with very few exceptions, there are no references to Christ in Coleridge's work after 'Religious Musings' and prior to his leaving for Germany.[5] During the Nether Stowey period Coleridge gradually turns away from his dissenting ministry becoming a minister for Nature, as Wordsworth put it, and also presenting Nature as a minister of God. This represents a movement away from Unitarianism but it does not, however, represent a political withdrawal; in the course of this period Coleridge would re-conceive the relationship between politics and religion.

These changes are reflected in the work published as Coleridge left for Germany, the pamphlet *Fears in Solitude*, and with which this concluding chapter is concerned. In this work, I suggest, Coleridge attempts to re-model himself in the eyes of his public, by consciously responding to the earlier work on which his reputation was built. Focusing particularly on 'Fears in Solitude' and 'Frost at Midnight', I analyse the developments in Coleridge's religious and political beliefs that become apparent by contrasting these works with those already considered in the thesis. The movement, I suggest, is the abandonment in his work of political faction and religious sect – his

[5] Three exceptions may be found in the *Ancient Mariner*: 'The very deeps did rot: O Christ! | That ever this should be!' (ll.119-20); see also l.226 and l.514. In each of these, however, 'Christ' is simply an exclamation, and does not represent an appeal to revealed religion. Extracts from William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991).

dissenting ministry – in an attempt to present himself as a minister of universal human values.

Coleridge had, as has been discussed in chapter three, appealed to natural religion before, but he approached it principally as evidence for proofs of the truth of revealed religion. On retiring to Nether Stowey and particularly as his friendship with the Wordsworths developed, however, the potential of nature for revealing the presence of God became a central theme of his conversation poems. Coleridge had already explored the relationship between God and nature in the 1795 poem 'The Eolian Harp', posing himself and his interlocutor Sara, the question,

> And what if all animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of all? (ll.36-40)

On putting the question he immediately rejects the proposition as frivolous and unholy, and encouraged by Sara's 'mild reproof' he recoils from conceptualising 'th'Incomprehensible' in any way whatsoever:

> These shapings of the unregenerate mind,
> Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
> On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
> For never guiltless may I speak of Him,
> Th'Incomprehensible! save when with awe
> I praise him, and with Faith that inly *feels*. (ll.47-52)

As I have pointed out in chapter three, this reticence towards formulating a philosophical account of God's presence in nature is remarkable. Only three months before he had lectured his Bristol audiences on the intelligibility of God in the creation: 'The Omnipotent has unfolded to us the Volume of the World, that there we

may read the Transcript of himself' (*LPR*, 94).

In 'Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement', the sense of a divine presence in nature is handled with a little more confidence. In the second verse paragraph Coleridge describes his ascent of a 'stony mount' and the picturesque panorama that he gains as he climbs. The passage builds to a crescendo as, in Kelvin Everest's description, 'each subtle elevation of tone creates the possibility of a correspondingly greater intensity of mental life, [and] culminates in an elevated calm, a breathless, arrested confrontation with the view in its entirety'.[6]

> But the time, when first
> From that low dell, steep up the stony mount
> I climbed with perilous toil and reached the top,
> Oh! what a goodly scene! Here the bleak mount,
> The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with sheep;
> Gray clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny fields;
> And river, now with bushy rocks o'erbrowed,
> Now winding bright and full, with naked banks;
> And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,
> And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire;
> The Channel there, the Islands and white sails,
> Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless Ocean –
> It seemed like Omnipresence! God, methought,
> Had built him there a temple: the whole World
> Seemed imaged in its vast circumference,
> No wish profaned my overhwelmèd heart.
> Blest hour! It was a luxury, - to be! (ll.26-42)

The final ecstatic effusion conveys an emotional completeness, but the sense of divine presence in the scene is tentative: 'it *seemed* like Omnipresence', and 'methought' suggest an uncertainty that one might not expect within a temple to God. Moreover this vision is rejected, albeit reluctantly, in the poem as Coleridge's social conscience asserts itself and he commits to the 'bloodless fight | Of science, freedom, and the truth in Christ' (ll.61-2):

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[6] *Secret Ministry*, p.238.

> Ah! quiet dell! Dear Cot, and mount sublime!
> I was constrained to quit you. Was it right,
> While my unnumbered brethren toiled and bled,
> That I should dream away the entrusted hours
> On rose-leafs beds, pampering the coward heart
> With feelings all too delicate for use? (ll.43-8)

Everest his argued convincingly, however, that this passage and the lines following in which Coleridge asserts the pull of his social conscience over retirement (up to l.62) represent a 'failure of tone [that] undercuts any conviction in the sentiment'.[7]

It is perhaps not surprising that Coleridge, in the context of his public identity at this time, might have felt pressure to disavow his 'delicious solitude' (l.58) and to take up an active role in society. Everest relates the stylistic problems in the passage to Coleridge's insecurity about his audience, leading to oscillation between a 'private audience of retirement [...] and a public rhetoric that Coleridge is too nervous, personally and politically, to sustain'.[8]

Coleridge was aware that his poem is a mixture of public discourse and the private meditative mode (though he did not see this as a fault), and when it was published in the second edition of his *Poems*, a line from Horace is added as a sub-title, 'sermoni propriora'. Coleridge would later translate this as 'properer for a sermon',[9] and more recently Daniel E. White has built on this, suggesting that,

> The Latin *sermo* [...] the word that describes Horace's *Satires*, means literally not simply 'prose' but more precisely 'conversation.' Horace's *Satires*, then, like Coleridge's poems, are 'sermoni propriora,' closer to or more proper for a Coleridge 'sermon' or 'conversation'.[10]

White goes on to relate Coleridge's conversational mode more generally to religious

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[7] Ibid, p.240.
[8] Ibid, p.241.
[9] *CL* ii. 864.
[10] White, Daniel E., '"Properer for a Sermon": Particularities of Dissent and Coleridge's Conversational Mode', *SiR*, 40 (Summer 2001), 175-98 (p.189).

oratory:

> A revised fair copy of 'Fears in Solitude,' signed 'S.T.C.,' contains the following note: 'N.B. The above is perhaps not Poetry, – but rather a sort of middle thing between Poetry and Oratory – sermoni propriora' (Keach 466). The conversation poems are composed, then, on the middle ground between poetry and oratory – sermons – not between poetry and prose. Whereas later Coleridge will substitute metaphysics as the counterbalance to poetry, in the 1790s this role is played by the ideas and values that inform Coleridge's religious oratory'.[11]

This link to the sermon is significant, and even though in the conversation poems written over the next two years Coleridge would largely abandon the public voice for a more consistent private address, the tendency to sermonise – albeit with greater subtlety – remains.

In a letter to Southey of July 1797, Coleridge refers to 'Reflections' as 'I think the best of my poems', but also transcribes a new poem that has subsequently come to be regarded as more successful, 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison'.[12] In this poem Coleridge is no longer ill at ease as he celebrates the virtues of retirement, and does not feel the pressure to abandon it, return to the cities, and fight the good fight. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the same month the Wordsworths would take up residence at Alfoxden, thus giving Coleridge both social and poetic reasons not to feel guilt in retirement.[13] He did not, however, publish the poem for another three years, suggesting perhaps that he still felt uncomfortable to publicly avow the life of retirement without an accompanying commitment to society.

Another striking change in this poem is the rendering of natural imagery. As Everest comments, Coleridge's 'eye for the minute details of nature clearly grew more watchful under the influence of Dorothy and her brother, and the poem that he wrote

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[11] Ibid., p.189.
[12] *CL* i 334-6.
[13] For a discussion of the relationship between 'Lime Tree Bower' and Wordsworth's 'Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree', see H.W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: Athlone, 1962), pp.80-1.

during their stay with Lamb displays a new keenness of visual awareness'.[14] A prose prologue to the poem explains that 'the author' had 'met with an accident which disabled him from walking', and so left behind in the bower, he imagines his friends walking amidst the local scenery:[15]

> They, meanwhile,
> Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
> On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
> Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
> To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
> The roaring dell, o'erwooded, narrow, deep,
> And only speckled by the mid-day sun;
> Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
> Flings arching like a bridge; - that branchless ash,
> Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
> Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
> Fanned by the water-fall! And there my friends
> Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
> That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
> Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
> Of the blue clay-stone. (ll.5-20)

This attention not only to the variety of natural forms, but to their colours and sounds is unprecedented in Coleridge's poetry. It has a specificity that could even support the following note to the line 'the dark green file of long lank weeds', in later editions of the poem:

> The Aplenium Scolopendrium, called in some countries the Adder's Tongue, in others the Hart's Tongue; but Withering gives the Adder's Tongue as the trivial name of the Ophioglossum only. (*Keach*, p.493)

This information does not add much to the above passage, which is delicately rendered but does not become topographical at any point. Moreover it conveys the changing feelings of the author whilst simultaneously painting the imaginary walk, as

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[14] *Secret Ministry*, p.242.
[15] *Keach*, p.138. All references to 'Lime Tree Bower' are to *Keach*, pp.138-40.

Everest has carefully observed:

> The language of natural description is at once minute in observation, and exactly expressive of Coleridge's developing mood, with its emerging potential to register a pervasive unity between phenomena, and between natural phenomena and the perceiving self. [...] The descent into the roaring dell picks up Coleridge's mood, that is to say, he projects his inner darkness onto the scene in which he imagines his friends to be. But the intensity and increasing excitement of the visualisation lifts the tone up from darkness, and issues in the fascinated contemplation ('a most fantastic sight!') of a scene from which Lamb and the Wordsworths can then be conceived by Coleridge to emerge, into the wide view, beneath an open sky.[16]

It is interesting to compare Coleridge's use of parentheses with an earlier instance of this in 'The Eolian Harp'. The earlier poem begins with natural description, but the parenthetical comments take the reader from the scene and to the author's mind, allegorising as he describes:

> Most soothing sweet it is
> To sit beside our cot, our cot o'er grown
> With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,
> (Meet emblems they of Innocence and Love!)
> And watch the clouds, that late were rich with light,
> Slow-sad'ning round, and mark the star of eve
> Serenely brilliant (such should Wisdom be)
> Shine opposite! (ll.3-9)

By contrast 'Lime-Tree Bower' does not pause in the description to interpret, but to express joy at the scene he contemplates in his mind's eye: 'a most fantastic sight!' This movement from the particulars of the scene to an impassioned response to it, occurs with greater intensity in the succeeding passage, and as with 'Reflections', this happens as the countryside is visualised from a more distant perspective. The landscape begins to be seen as a whole, and the light of the setting sun further unifies the scene, as the author moves from the physical to the metaphysical:

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[16] *Secret Ministry*, p.250.

Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
Ye purple heath-flowers! richlier burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue ocean! So my Friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence. (ll.32-43)

The 'Reflections' account of the divine presence in nature – 'it seemed like Omnipresence!' – is tentative compared to this, although the relationships being proposed in the later poem are enigmatic. As Everest has pointed out, for example 'the grammatical status of "gaze" is uncertain; the mood may be subjunctive, or imperative, and its subject may be Lamb, or Coleridge'.[17] This ambiguity as is nothing compared to 'such hues | As veil the Almighty Spirit'. Again Everest is helpful who suggests that such imagery has a precedent in the Psalms, for example: 'O Lord my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment' (Ps 102.1-2). Coleridge's own attempt to elucidate the passage in a note to Southey is not especially helpful: 'you remember, I am a *Berkleian*' (*CL* i 335). As Everest says, 'this is too vague to be of much use'.[18]

Despite the ambiguous philosophical and theological character of this passage, it has an affecting emotional force that is partly the result of the tonal control of the passage building up to it. And the sentiment is further authenticated by its effect on the rest of the poem, as the author is shocked out of the gloom with which the poem begins, and no longer perceives the bower as a prison:

A delight

[17] Ibid, p.254.
[18] Ibid, p.253.

> Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
> As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not marked
> Much that has soothed me. (ll.43-7)

The double negative in this passage slows the rhythm, much as a double negative in the final verse paragraph of 'The Eolian Harp' does: 'nor such thoughts | Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject' (ll.50-1). But whereas the earlier poem ends in a mood of remorseful guilt and a thanksgiving for what he has received, 'Lime-Tree Bower' returns to attentive natural description, this time in response to what he sees rather than what he imagines. This passage builds to another emotional climax, repeating in miniature the movement of the poem up to this point:

> Pale beneath the blaze
> Hung the transparent foliage; and I watched
> Some broad and sunny leaf, and loved to see
> The shadow of the leaf and stem above
> Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut-tree
> Was richly tinged, and a deep radiance lay
> Full on the ancient ivy which usurps
> Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
> Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
> Through the late twilight: and though now the bat
> Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
> Yet still the solitary humble bee
> Sings in the bean-flower! Henceforth I shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! (ll.47-64)

Again Coleridge moves from a sensitive depiction of his scene in the dying light, to an abstraction, this time the capitalized 'Nature'. Nature is celebrated as always having the potential to fulfil each of the senses and to awaken the '*heart*'. As the earlier verse paragraph had shown, with the heart awakened and the senses roused to the point of inspired disorientation – 'silent with swimming sense' – the presence of

the Almighty Spirit may be felt. Nature has become a minister of the Almighty Spirit.

The transformation in the speaker manifests in an almost panglossian celebration of Nature – 'no plot so narrow, be but Nature there' – but Coleridge's view of the city as expressed elsewhere (in the *Lectures* for example) suggests that some places *are* too narrow and vacant. However 'Lime-Tree Bower' is a poem whose movements are governed by the emotional state of the speaker, and the celebration of the omnipresence of Nature should be read in the context of experiencing the bower as a prison, at the beginning of the poem. Indeed the emotional context of the speaker is the presiding movement in the conversation poems generally, and the passages that appear philosophical should be read in this context of emotional transformation. They are not philosophical arguments declaring dry ontological truths about the relations between man, nature, and God; they are attempts to register a sense of the divine, apprehended in a heightened state of emotion.[19] Indeed I would argue that Coleridge is considerably more successful in conveying a sense of religious awe and emotion in his conversation poems, than in either his lectures on revealed religion or his foot-noted and densely-packed 'Religious Musings', even whilst they might seem to be more explicitly about religion.

'Lime-Tree Bower' can be seen as a prototype for 'Frost at Midnight', written just over six months later. For some time 'Frost at Midnight' has been seen as the epitome of Coleridge's poetry in the meditative apolitical mode, and in turn as a metonym for the broader development of Romantic lyric poetry. This is a tradition described by Judith Thompson:

> Widely regard as among his most successful works, Coleridge's conversation poems

[19] Coleridge's description of Wordsworth is interesting with respect to this. He told Hazlitt that Wordsworth seemed 'to discover truth by intuition, rather than by deduction', *My First Acquaintance with Poets*, quoted in *Interviews and Reflections*, p.64.

> have long been taken as typical of that broad transition in voice and vision that defines romanticism: from public genres to private lyric modes, from the world of radical political activism to the solitary, transcendent realm of imagination. [...] ['Frost at Midnight'] appears as distant from the public debates and political divisions of its historical period as its quiet, sincere meditations are from the zealous exhortations and rhetorical excesses of Coleridge's lectures and more topical poems.[20]

Thompson questions this account of 'Frost at Midnight', building on the earlier work of Paul Magnuson who has argued that by considering the initial context of publication – the pamphlet *Fears in Solitude* – the political resonance of 'Frost at Midnight' emerges.[21] Thompson adds to this by suggesting that 'Frost at Midnight' was 'shaped and articulated in response to Thelwall in a private debate which paralleled and echoed the public one'.[22] She is arguing in other words that the public discourses with which the poem engages, are implicit in the private conversations with Thelwall and which led to the composition of the poem.

The current discussion, like Magnuson however, places emphasis on the publication context, because it is in this pamphlet that Coleridge addresses the public a final time before leaving for Germany. By reading 'Frost at Midnight' in the context of the pamphlet, a perspective is gained on the development, and then abandonment, of his dissenting ministry. This re-casting of his ministry involves three basic manoeuvres: a review of his past political sympathies; an up-date of his position in the context of the political scene in 1798; and a depiction of his character as a Christian patriot, committed to 'human kind'.[23] This, in outline, is the pamphlet *Fears in Solitude*.

Both 'Fears in Solitude' and 'France: An Ode' have had mixed receptions by critics, generally being considered duplicitous and vacillating in the political allegiances

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[20] *Autumnal Blast*, p.427.
[21] Cf. *Politics of 'Frost at Midnight'*.
[22] *An Autumnal Blast*, p.428.
[23] 'Fears in Solitude', l.232. All citations from 'Fears in Solitude' may be found in *Keach*, pp.239-44.

espoused in them.[24] The early part of 1798 was a difficult time for English radicals, because it was an unusually volatile period politically. Erdman has described how 'in December 1797 the tide of popular opposition to the Assessed Taxes buoyed politicians and journalists with renewed Jacobinism of tone'.[25] Coleridge played his part in this, publishing a number of risky poems in the radical press. The most outspoken was 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter', published in the *Morning Post* on January 8 1798, an allegory that repeatedly pointed the finger at Pitt for the destructive effects of the war.

Two events charged the atmosphere dramatically, and increased the risks involved in writing or printing radical material. The first was the arrest of John Binns, a prominent figure in the London Corresponding Society (in which Thelwall had been active), and two Irishmen James Coigley and Arthur O'Connor.[26] They were suspected of communicating with the French and offering to arm the disaffected in England who would join with an invading French army. Coigley hanged for his part in the affair, and although the other two were not charged, the case brought about an increase in Ministerial pressure, as Erdman has explained:

> Binns and O'Connor were acquitted of treason, but not before enough alarm had been worked up to rouse the Gentry and Proprietors to vote the suspension of Habeas Corpus: whereupon the acquitted and other suspected Democrats and Reformers could be jailed without indictment or trial. In the wake of the arrests, 'insolent and indecent liberties' began 'to be taken throughout the kingdom with the characters of those persons who [had] forborne to support the Minister in his mad and merciless career,' the *Courier* charged (8 March). (*EOT* i. lxxvii)

The second development that had a powerful effect on the radical cause, was the invasion of the Swiss cantons by the French Revolutionary armies in January 1798.

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[24] See for example *Radical Years*, pp.263-8; Michael John Kooy, 'Disinterested Patriotism: Bishop Butler, Hazlitt and Coleridge's Quarto Pamphlet of 1798', *CB*, 21 (2003), 55-65 (p.57).
[25] *EOT* i. lxxiv-v.
[26] This matter is discussed in more detail in *EOT* i. lxxvii-lxxxi.

By April it had been renamed the Helvetic Republic, and in the process it appeared that imperialism rather than the spread of the Rights of Man was a better explanation of French actions and ambitions. In the 'argument' of 'France', Coleridge describes the betrayal of 'the hope, that France would make conquests by no other means, than by presenting to the observation of Europe, a people more happy, and better instructed, than under other forms of Government'.[27] In the wake of the invasion of Switzerland, the Ministerial interpretation of France's character appeared just after all.

The *Morning Post* responded on April 16 with the following editorial note, prefacing Coleridge's ode 'France', at that point titled 'Recantation: An Ode':

> The following excellent Ode will be in unison with the feelings of every friend to Liberty and foe to Oppression; of all who, admiring the French Revolution, detest and deplore the conduct of France towards Switzerland. It is very satisfactory to find so zealous and steady an advocate for Freedom as Mr Coleridge concur with us in condemning the conduct of France towards the Swiss Cantons. Indeed his concurrence is not singular; we know of no Friend to Liberty who is not of his opinion. What we most admire is the *avowal* of his sentiments, and public censure of the unprincipled and atrocious conduct of France. (*Keach*, p.517)

Coleridge's strategy in the poem was to demonstrate that his commitment was always been to the '*spirit* of divinest Liberty' (l.21, my italics), rather than offering uncritical support to the French experience. The distinction between the spirit of Liberty and the forms it might inspire, is opened up in the first stanza, 'an invocation to those objects in Nature, the contemplation of which had inspired the Poet with a devotional love of Liberty'.[28] This establishes the ground on which he avows his support for France in the second stanza:

> When France in wrath her giant limbs uprear'd,

[27] *Keach*, p.518. It is interesting to notice the means by which Coleridge hoped the Revolution would spread: by the irresistible happiness of its citizens. This was, of course, the same means that Coleridge had intended for the spread of Pantisocracy.
[28] Ibid, p.518.

> And with that oath, which shook earth, air, and sea,
> Stamp'd her strong foot, and said, she would be free,
> Bear witness for me, how I hop'd and fear'd! (ll.22-5)

Coleridge is invoking Nature as the witness of his hopes and fears, but it is far easier to find Coleridge's hope and support for France in his earlier work, than his fears. He goes on to declare his home-born feelings for Britain, but his commitment to Liberty forced him to back France in the war:

> For ne'er, O Liberty, with partial aim
> I dimm'd thy light, or damp'd thy holy flame!
> I blest the Paeans of deliver'd France,
> And hung my head and wept at Britain's name. (ll.39-42)

The third stanza addresses the difficulty in reconciling the ideals of equality, fraternity, and liberty with the brutal suppression and executions occurring during the Terror. In the 'argument' Coleridge presents his support throughout the Terror as a consequence of the poet in him, even whilst his Reason 'began to suggest many apprehensions'.[29] Although it is tempting to think this a disingenuous claim, the figure of Robespierre was certainly a problematic one in Coleridge's earlier work, as may be seen in *Conciones ad Populum*:

> Brissot, the leader of the Gironde party, is entitled to the character of a virtuous man, and an eloquent speaker; but he was rather a sublime visionary, than a quick-eyed politician; and his excellences equally with his faults rendered him unfit for the helm, in the stormy hour of Revolution. Robespierre, who displaced him, possessed a glowing ardour that still remembered the *end*, and a cool ferocity that never either overlooked or scrupled, the *means*. [...] I rather think, that the distant prospect, to which he was travelling, appeared to him grand and beautiful; but that he fixed his eye on it with such intense eagerness as to neglect the foulness of the road. (*LPR*, 34-5)

The turning point in the poem, however, is stanza four in which the invasion of Switzerland is presented as an unveiling of the corrupt motives of the French from the

[29] Ibid, p.518.

very beginning:

> O France! that mockest Heav'n, adult'rous, blind,
> And patient only in pernicious toils,
> Was this thy boast, champion of human kind!
> To mix with Monarchs in the lust of sway,
> Yell in the hunt, and share the murd'rous prey –
> To insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils
> From freemen torn! to tempt and to betray!
>
> The sensual and the dark rebel in vain,
> Slaves by their own compulsion! In mad game
> They break their manacles, and wear the name
> Of Freedom graven on an heavier chain. (ll.78-88)

These lines do not represent simply a rejection of the latest French actions in Switzerland, but of the possibility of the success of the Revolution in the first place. The French are now condemned as adulterous and blind, sensual and dark, whose actions are doomed to failure. The poem ends by reaffirming the distinction between the spirit of Liberty and its embodied forms in Government.

Although 'Recantation' represents an attempted negotiation of the political developments of 1798, it does not offer direction or guidance to an audience facing its neighbour in war. When the poem was published a second time, it was subordinated in the pamphlet to the poem that would include an exhortation to act, 'Fears in Solitude'.

As discussed above, Coleridge referred to 'Fears in Solitude' as 'perhaps not Poetry, – but rather a sort of middle thing between Poetry and Oratory – sermoni propriora'.[30] This is an apt description and makes explicit the combination of the public and private discourses present in most of the conversation poems to varying degrees. The poem begins with conscious echoes of 'Reflections':

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[30] Ibid, p.522.

A green and silent spot, amid the hills,
A small and silent dell! O'er stiller place
No singing sky-lark ever poised himself.
The hills are heathy, save that the swelling slope,
Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on,
All golden with the never-bloomless furze,
Which now blooms most profusely: but the dell,
Bathed in the mist, is fresh and delicate
As vernal corn-field, or the unripe flax,
When, through its half-transparent stalks, at eve,
The level sunshine glimmers with green light. (ll.1-11)

Whereas in 'Reflections' the calm of retirement is disturbed by the thought of neglecting the city where social injustice must be fought, in this poem the private realm of solitude and retirement is especially precarious: a subtitle informs the reader that it was written 'during the alarm of an invasion'.[31]

Following the tranquil opening, the introduction of the 'humble man' in line fourteen echoes the appearance of 'Bristowa's citizen' in 'Reflections'. Their circumstances are contrasting, however. Whereas in 'Reflections' the serenity of the natural environment elevates his appetites – 'it calmed | His thirst of idle gold' (ll.12-3) – in the later poem, the figure is a man whose youthful folly has humbled him, and made him receptive to his surroundings:

From the sun, and from the breezy air,
Sweet influences trembled o'er his frame;
And he, with many feelings, many thoughts,
Made up a meditative joy, and found
Religious meanings in the forms of nature!
And so, his senses gradually wrapt
In a half sleep, he dreams of better worlds. (ll.20-8)

In such a scene and with these responses we might expect the speaker to find himself overcome by emotion, and be moved to declare his faith in the divinity of nature; as is the case in 'Reflections' and in 'This Lime-Tree Bower'. In 'Fears in Solitude',

[31] Ibid, p.239.

however, there is a dramatic change of tone as the thought of invasion and war disturbs the calm, and leads to a mixture of patriotic fervour and universal accusation:

> My God! it is a melancholy thing
> For such a man, who would full fain preserve
> His soul in calmness, yet perforce must feel
> For all his human brethren – O my God!
> It weighs upon the heart, that he must think
> What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
> This way or that way o'er these silent hills –
> Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,
> And all the crash of onset; fear and rage,
> And undetermined conflict – even now,
> Even now, perchance, and in his native isle:
> Carnage and groans beneath this blessed sun!
> We have offended, Oh! My countrymen!
> We have offended very grievously,
> And been most tyrannous. From east to west
> A groan of accusation pierces Heaven!
> The wretched plead against us; multitudes
> Countless and vehement, the sons of God,
> Our brethren! Like a cloud that travels on,
> Steamed up from Cairo's swamps of pestilence,
> Even so, my countrymen! have we gone forth
> And borne to distant tribes slavery and pangs,
> And, deadlier far, our vices, whose deep taint
> With slow perdition murders the whole man,
> His body and his soul! (ll.29-53)

The poetic register has changed to the language of a political sermon, and the poem remains in this mode almost until the end. The enjambed lines and lengthy sentences of the opening are replaced by short declamations, repetitions, and numerous exclamation marks, in a rousing mixture of accusation and confession. The plural pronoun, 'we', joins the speaker and his audience, and together they admit their crimes under Heaven, and acknowledge the pleas of the wretched. Moreover he joins victims and perpetrators by appealing to 'human brethren' and 'the sons of God', establishing familial bonds as both human beings and as God's creatures. This could appear to an unsympathetic contemporary reader as tending towards the abstract 'rights of man', transcending national differences, but in this passage, there is also an

emphasis on this 'native isle' and '*my* countrymen'.

With the exception of the cloud from 'Cairo's swamps of pestilence', Coleridge resists his former tendencies towards abstraction and personification, that crowd 'Religious Musings'. 'Fears in Solitude' resembles 'Religious Musings', however, insofar as it attempts to negotiate a broad range of religious and political themes: the war, the slave trade, the intellectual and emotional paucity of atheism, the degradation of religion in the public sphere, and so forth. There is a correspondingly wide range of moods in the poems, but which Coleridge modulates rather more successfully in the later effort. This may be illustrated by comparing the following passage from 'Fears in Solitude' with the 'Digression to the Present War' of 'Religious Musings' (examined in chapter four):

> The sweet words
> Of Christian promise, words that even yet
> Might stem destruction, were they wisely preached,
> Are muttered o'er by men, whose tones proclaim
> How flat and wearisome they feel their trade:
> Rank scoffers some, but most too indolent
> To deem them falsehoods or to know their truth.
> Oh! blasphemous! the book of life is made
> A superstitious instrument, on which
> We gabble o'er the oaths we mean to break;
> For all must swear – all and in every place,
> College and wharf, council and justice-court;
> All, all must swear, the briber and the bribed,
> Merchant and lawyer, senator and priest,
> The rich, the poor, the old man and the young;
> All, all make up one scheme of perjury,
> That faith doth reel; the very name of God
> Sounds like a juggler's charm. (ll.63-80)

Again Coleridge suggests universal complicity in the errors of the nation, repeatedly condemning 'all' for their meaningless oath-taking. The issue is not the particular interpretation of the Bible, whether Unitarian, Anglican, or otherwise; nor is it the support for the war preached by the Church. Indeed even the institutional uses of

Christianity in every sphere, from the court to the wharf, are not condemned. The issue is one of apathy, as the Bible becomes degraded by casual heartless repetition. The contrast with the true value of the Bible, ignored by 'all', is the key sentiment in this passage. And it is interesting to notice that this is not a protest about the obligation to take religious oaths, as might be expected from a dissenter, but simply the manner in which they are taken.

In 'Religious Musings', however, the contrast between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of the times, gives rise to some of Coleridge's most over-blown verse, as he attempts to inspire his theme with pathos and indignation:

> Thee to defend, dear Saviour of mankind!
> Thee, Lamb of God! Thee, blameless Prince of peace!
> From all sides rush the thirsty brood of War –
> Austria, and that foul Woman of the North,
> The lustful murderess of her wedded lord!
> And he, connatural mind! whom [...]
> Some Fury fondled in her hate to man,
> Bidding her serpent hair in mazy surge
> Lick his young face, and at his mouth imbreathe
> Horrible sympathy! [...]
> Thee to defend the Moloch priest prefers
> The prayer of hate, and bellows to the herd
> That Deity, accomplice Deity
> In the fierce jealousy of wakened wrath,
> Will go forth with our armies and our fleets
> To scatter the red ruin on their foes!
> O blasphemy! to mingle fiendish deeds
> With blessedness! (ll.168-92)

The contrast between Christianity and the state of the Europe was a fruitful one for radical dissenters, as it enabled them to point to the corruption of both Church and State in one device. Whereas in 'Fears in Solitude' Coleridge looks to widespread devaluation of Christianity by all, the passage from 'Religious Musings' reduces events to a cruel drama played out by depraved power-mad despots. Moreover the Church is singled out for blame for its active promotion of a warlike Christianity.

These differences may be explained in part by the different intentions Coleridge had in publishing the poems. The earlier poem is intended to convey indignation at the corruption of the Ministries, and to announce Coleridge as a serious poet-prophet at the beginning of his career. The later poem is a diplomatic effort intended to represent Coleridge as a moderate, as he leaves England behind. But there is also a development in Coleridge's religious thought that is reflected in the differences between the poems. There is a problematic inconsistency in 'Religious Musings' (as I have pointed out in chapter four), insofar as he condemns the Church for invoking God's support for the English war campaign; but later in the poem Coleridge would indulge in a similarly crude reading of the Bible, appointing divine favour to the radicals. He alludes to Revelation and reads the destruction of the Whore of Babylon as a prophecy of the fall of the Church, and links the French Revolution with the opening of the seals by the Lamb of God, presenting Christ in an altogether more militaristic light. The poem does not simply condemn the Church for claiming divine support for its war, but implies that God is with the French.

The relationship between God and history is altogether more complicated in 'Fears in Solitude'. Following a moving passage in which Coleridge laments the common ignorance of the brutality of war, and the unfelt violence of casual support by 'this whole people' (l.93), he prophecies the possible consequences:

> Therefore, evil days
> Are coming on us, O my countrymen!
> And what if all-avenging Providence,
> Strong and retributive, should make us know
> The meaning of our words, force us to feel
> The desolation and the agony
> Of our fierce doings! (ll.124-9)

Coleridge is still asserting a link between God and history, but the representation of

the agency of 'Providence' is cautious.

It is striking, furthermore, that whereas in 'Religious Musings' divine vengeance is prophesied, it is presented as a reason for the people to 'rest awhile', for 'the day of retribution [is] nigh: | The Lamb of God hath opened the fifth seal' (ll.303-4). Coleridge does not call for action by the people, but simply to wait until the 'elect' grow powerful enough to perfect society (again their number and influence would grow through the attraction of their serene happiness, the model of change for the Pantisocracy and the French Revolution). Almost the opposite happens in 'Fears in Solitude', as the register of the poem changes again. From the warnings and accusations directed at everybody, Coleridge the minister, petitions on behalf of the nation, and then exhorts all to action:

> Spare us yet awhile,
> Father and God! O! spare us yet awhile!
> Oh! let not English women drag their flight
> Fainting beneath the burthen of their babes,
> Of the sweet infants, that but yesterday
> Laughed at the breast! Sons, brothers, husbands, all
> Who ever gazed with fondness on the forms
> Which grew up with you round the same fire-side,
> And all who ever heard the sabbath-bells
> Without the infidel's scorn, make yourselves pure!
> Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe,
> Impious and false, a light yet cruel race,
> Who laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth
> With deeds of murder; and still promising
> Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free,
> Poison life's amities, and cheat the heart
> Of faith and quiet hope, and all that soothes
> And all that lifts the spirit! (ll.129-46)

This is a somewhat unexpected turn in the poem. The condemnation of the French as a 'race', echoes the severity of the lines in the fourth stanza of 'France', discussed above, and seems to be at odds with the impartial commitment to 'human kind' elsewhere in the poem. Certainly the call to arms is a total reversal of his former

political sympathies, but the heroic language used to encourage war is quite unexpected: 'Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe!' Still more strange is the thought that such actions could elevate: 'make yourselves pure!' The implication of this line appears to be that the English are still held guilty for provoking the war, but by fighting they could compensate for their error. Hence the poem continues by advocating a sober and remorseful attitude to victory:

> And oh! may we return
> Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,
> Repenting of the wrongs with which we stung
> So fierce a foe to frenzy! (ll.150-3)

The continued use of the plural pronoun, indicating communal guilt, is carried forward into a passage in which government is presented unexpectedly as a scapegoat by both extreme radicals as well as reactionaries. This marks quite a change from the anti-ministerialism that marked his earlier writing:

> We have been too long
> Dupes of a deep delusion! Some, belike,
> Groaning with restless enmity, expect
> All change from change of constituted power,
> As if a Government had been a robe,
> On which our vice and wretchedness were tagged
> Like fancy-points and fringes, with the robe
> Pulled off at pleasure. Fondly these attach
> A radical causation to a few
> Poor drudges of chastising Providence,
> Who borrow all their hues and qualities
> From our own folly and rank wickedness,
> Which gave them birth and nursed them. Others, meanwhile,
> Dote with a mad idolatry; and all
> Who will not fall before their images,
> And yield them worship, they are enemies
> Even of their country! (ll.159-75)

If this section is compared with the likes of 'Fire, Famine and Slaughter', published in January 1798, it indicates just how dramatically Coleridge's position has moved. Not

only has he repeatedly made communal accusations regarding the political troubles of the nation, here he suggests that it is 'we' who must look to change ourselves rather than making the government a scapegoat for our vices.

Coleridge ends the poem by turning to address his own radical legacy and how he has been viewed as an enemy of the country. He counters this by proclaiming his total connection with and dependence on Britain, his 'Mother Isle' (l.176). The importance of his upbringing and subsequent domestic affections are simply stated in this poem but it is in the final poem of the pamphlet that they are dramatised.

The proximity of Coleridge's acceptance of the Wedgwood annuity and the composition of 'Frost at Midnight' has been marked by many critics. The financial security that this created, as well as the apparently close and closed community that had developed between Coleridge, Poole, and the Wordsworths, and the absence of explicitly topical political material in the poem, has led many critics to read 'Frost at Midnight' as having been written in a mood of serene detachment from the problems of the world. Thompson has commented on the influences informing the mood of the poem:

> According to critics and biographers, this mood was influenced by Coleridge's feelings of financial security, his observations of and love for Hartley, the reminiscences of his own childhood he had been composing in letters to Poole, an observant new attention to particulars of nature fostered by his friendship with the Wordsworths, and his reading of Cowper's *The Task*.[32]

This reading, as Thompson points out however, does not account for the uneasy atmosphere in which the poem begins:

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry

[32] *Autumnal Blast*, p.434.

> Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
> 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
> And vexes meditation with its strange
> And extreme silentness. (ll.1-10)

In the context of its publication – that is, following 'Fears in Solitude' and 'France' – Magnuson asks pertinently 'why is not the relation between the calm and the vexation in "Frost at Midnight" the same as it is at the beginning of "Fears in Solitude" when calm and retired solitude turns abruptly to thoughts of war'?[33] And if Thompson is right in suggesting that the poem emerges from a poetic dialogue with Thelwall, the tone of disturbed tranquillity would be appropriate to their mutual feelings of political insecurity.

The opening line of the poem has deservedly attracted a great deal of critical comment, and Everest – who finds the title of his book in the line – notes that it may well hint at the unwanted attentions of government spies:

> The diction carries an elusive resonance. The frost has something beautiful to make; 'ministry' implies the agency of the frost, its operation under a higher command, and its minute, unnoticeable action has an urgency, almost a fugitive quality, in the epithet 'secret'. 'Performs' subtly reinforces the sense of a task to be done, a task that is at once lonely and isolated, introspective and wary, and yet very important, full of potential and implication; like the task of a secret agent.[34]

Any allusions – whether to government spies, the threat of invasion, or a retirement version of the Unitarian ministry he had recently rejected – are not developed in the poem however. The opening of the poem remains mysterious and suggestive.

I would suggest, however, that when Coleridge published the poem in *Fears in Solitude*, six months after composing it, he is quite consciously shaping the public

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[33] *Politics in 'Frost at Midnight'*, p.10.
[34] *Secret Ministry*, p.259.

perception of his dissenting ministry. Whereas in 'Fears in Solitude' he had avowed his commitment to domestic affections, to God, and to the beauty of the English countryside, in 'Frost at Midnight' these commitments are dramatised in a domestic scene that gives a favourable insight into the family life of an alleged Jacobin. He is not a radical rousing the mob to overthrow the state, but a contemplative poet who is disturbed by the political atmosphere.

Although the speaker is not alone – his baby son slumbers beside him – the mood is solitary, as he seeks 'companiable form[s]' (l.19) in his cottage on a chilling night. Fixing on the 'thin blue flame' on the embers of his fire – a foot note explaining this to be a 'stranger', popularly 'supposed to portend the arrival of some absent friend'[35] – he is transported back to his lonely childhood:

> But O! how oft,
> How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
> Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
> To watch that fluttering *stranger!* and as oft
> With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
> Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
> Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
> From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
> So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
> With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
> Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
> So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
> Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams! (ll.23-35)

The film on the grate connects his present solitude with a childhood of loneliness, but in the recollection the consciousness of the speaker becomes fixed upon an object of contemplation. He is no longer disturbed by the menacing atmosphere of his cottage but forming connections between things present and past. The mood of the poem lightens and steadily builds towards an emotional surge as Coleridge turns to his son,

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[35] *Keach*, p.515.

and predicts an altogether happier childhood than his own. Everest has commented on the expanding range:

> The 'stranger' points to a continuity in time, relating Coleridge's memory, in his cottage, of a moment in childhood, to the child Coleridge's memory, in school, of a still earlier moment. And as this unity in experience emerges, so the poem simultaneously telescopes out in range; a long receding temporal perspective is quite suddenly introduced in the memory within a memory, which will also become a forward temporal perspective as Coleridge contrasts his past childhood with the future childhood that awaits Hartley. A connectedness is thus suggested, not only in the continuity between Coleridge and his earlier self, but between his present self and the sleeping baby at his side. As the unifying impulse in consciousness strengthens, so the apparently discrete elements in experience multiply and lead to a constantly more comprehensive unity.[36]

The temporal unity is part of a building pattern of connectedness, of conversation, and which anticipates the possibility of communion with God through nature:

> Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
> Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
> Fill up the interspersed vacancies
> And momentary pauses of the thought!
> My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
> With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
> And think that thou shalt learn far other lore
> And in far other scenes! For I was reared
> In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
> And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
> But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
> Of that eternal language, which thy God
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.
> Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
> Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (ll.44-64)

In the pauses between his searching observations of the surroundings, and the reminiscences, Coleridge is conversing finally with the companionable form most

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[36] *Secret Ministry*, p.265.

suited to break the opening sense of isolation. By projecting his hopes through his child, the poem conveys social integration and commitment to the future, perhaps countering Coleridge's public image as a radical, challenging traditional institutinos.

It is now helpful to return to considering the relationship between God and nature, in the context of the discussion above. There is no longer any tentativeness in the relationship, as Nature is presented as a language of God. In 'Reflections' the panoramic view had created a hint of a divine presence, and contentment overwhelmed his heart. In 'Lime-Tree Bower' he can *feel* the presence of the Almighty Spirit as his senses are disorientated. In the above passage, however, the natural scene is generalized – 'lake and sandy shores', 'ancient mountain', and so on – but it does not become a veil or recede into the distance. The forms are the 'eternal language' of God, and the language is intelligible such that God may teach with and through it. Natural religion has become revealed religion.

This image is quite different from the use of nature to prove intelligent design as Coleridge had done in his 1795 lectures, a point made by Ian Wylie:

> If nature was God's language, it had to be saying something of significance. It was not enough merely to be pointing to God's presence in nature. Nature as a language thus differs significantly from nature as evidence of design (the teleological argument), for this seeks no more than to establish intelligent design in the order of the universe and thus prove God's existence. To prove that nature is a language, it is necessary to show that there is purpose in the design and that this can be communicated to man.[37]

The point is well made, but Coleridge does not attempt to suggest what the language says in any philosophical sense, but simply ends the poem with a series of exquisite images that say and do nothing:

> Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,

[37] *Young Coleridge*, p.86.

Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eve-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (ll.65-74)

The absence of comment or interpretation of these images – to state what they 'say' – underlines a point raised earlier. The conversation poems do not contain philosophical *arguments* but they do contain passages that draw on philosophical discourse. These passages, however, carry a predominantly emotional force, which influence the mood and direction of the succeeding lines in the poems. In this case the images carry a religious resonance by following on from the general assertion of the eternal language of God. The 'secret ministry of frost' is no longer a haunting image as it was at the beginning of the poem, for the speaker has transcended his isolation and conversed with companionable forms.

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When Coleridge sailed for Germany on September 19 1798, he was not abandoning the 'cause of religion'. Indeed it is fair to suggest that Coleridge was engaged on a Christian ministry all of his life, and in his last fifteen years, his work was almost uniformly concerned with Christianity. The years 1794-8, however, represent a discrete period that I have called his 'dissenting ministry' throughout this thesis, referring to both his religious dissent and his political radicalism. As this final chapter has demonstrated, Unitarianism ceased to be a significant part of his ministry as he withdrew from issues that could be defined as part of the Unitarian cause. His earlier

concerns with Christology, the corruptions of the Church, perfectibility, and to lesser extent subscription to the 39 Articles, are almost entirely absent in the work considered in this chapter. Instead there is a preoccupation with a divine presence in 'Nature', and a witness to religious experience in a context in which denomination is insignificant. Hereafter his published works would have nothing positive to say about Unitarianism, as he returned gradually to the Anglicanism of his upbringing.

It will also be clear that the political context in which he had made his reputation, changed dramatically as England and France dug in for a protracted war. Coleridge became increasingly aware of the complexity of national and international politics, and by and large he turned from topical affairs in the latter part of 1798. His dissent was at an end.

Appendix

Unitarianism and the Test Acts

During the Interregnum period of the English Civil War (1649-1660), the execution of Charles I left the Anglican Church itself without a head. The Acts of Supremacy during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I had made the reigning monarch 'the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England' and 'the only supreme governor of this realm, as well in all spiritual and ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal', respectively.[38] Below the reigning monarch was the Episcopacy, but with the removal of Charles I the Church, largely on account of the parliamentarians striking a deal with the Scottish to assist in the war against the king, leaned towards Presbyterianism:

> The ecclesiastical system of the Interregnum had been improvised to meet the peculiar situation in which its authors were placed; it was bound up with the forms of political administration they had adopted. [...] Since 1645 Presbyterianism had occupied the place of honour as the form of church polity by law established. [...] The control of ecclesiastical affairs was in the hands first of the Parliament and its committees, central and local [...] and afterwards of the Protector and the committees and commissioners whom he appointed to replace those of earlier days. The responsibilities delegated to these bodies were extensive: they sequestered those of the Episcopalian clergy whom they pronounced malignant, scandalous, or insufficient; appointed to the livings thus left vacant and to other benefices; examined the fitness of ministers prior to admitting them to the cures to which they had been presented; and also administered the property and financial resources of the church. [...] Except for enforcing the veto on the use of the Book of Common Prayer, they did not interfere with more distinctly religious matters. Questions such as ordination, terms of admission to the sacraments, and forms of worship were left, under the Protectorate at any rate, to the decision of ministers according to their individual judgement, or with such guidance as they obtained by taking counsel together in those of the classical presbyteries which maintained an active existence.[39]

At the restoration of Charles II, however, the Anglican Church was strengthened in an attempt to weaken the power of the Puritans that had executed the king and re-defined the role of parliament in the affairs of state. This process was begun by a return to the

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[38] E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, 3rd edn. (London, Longmans, 1955), pp.15-17.
[39] *Calamy Revised*, p.ix.

Episcopalian structure that had been in place in the reign of Charles I:

> The most immediately urgent aspect of the ecclesiastical problem was occasioned by the claims of the loyalist clergy. With the return of the King the survivors of those ejected under the late government demanded repossession of their benefices, and in certain instances forcibly took the law into their own hands.[40]

Following this, the Calvinistic Puritans were further restricted by the passing of four parliamentary Acts collectively known as the Clarendon Code.[41] The first was the Corporation Act (1661) which required 'all mayors, aldermen, councillors, and borough officials to swear loyalty to the king and to take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, according to the rites of the Church'. Most notorious of all the Acts was the Act of Uniformity (1662) which made the following demands:

> None but the episcopal ordination was recognized as valid. All clergy were required to make a public declaration of their 'unfeigned assent and consent' to the contents of a prayer book which had been revised with an anti-Puritan bias. Politically the Act fastened upon the Church the doctrine of non-resistance by requiring all its ministers, all professors, heads and fellows of colleges in the Universities, and also all schoolmasters and all tutors in private families, to sign a declaration abhorring all claim to offer armed resistance to the King or his representatives, [...] and a promise to conform to the liturgy of the Church of England. Ministers failing to comply with these terms by St. Bartholemew's Day, 24 Aug. 1662, were to be deprived of their livings, and in the event of their preaching thereafter were liable to three months' imprisonment.[42]

The result was the secession, or rather exclusion, of over two thousand clergy, approximately one fifth of the total number of ministers. The Conventicle Act (1664) forbade 'five or more people from meeting together for worship except in accordance with the liturgy of the Church.' And finally the Five-Mile Act (1665) imposed 'on all ejected clergy an oath not to endeavour at any time "any alteration of government either in church or state". Ministers who refused to comply were denied the liberty to

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[40] *Ibid*, p.xi.
[41] Definitions of the Clarendon Code taken from *The Dissenters*, pp.223-6 unless otherwise stated.
[42] *Calamy Revised*, p.xii.

come within five miles of any parish where they had exercised their ministry, any place where they had held conventicles, any city of corporate town, or any borough represented in Parliament.'

It was not just the scale of the secession caused by the Uniformity Act that made it a unique and seminal event in the history of Dissent:

> The ejection of ministers under the Act of Uniformity of 1662 was not the first nor the last recorded in the annals of English History. There had been similar ejections in the reigns of Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, King James I, and during the Interregnum, and there was to be yet another after the Revolution. But none of these bore permanent fruits. The proscribed clergy were ejected, and with that the matter was over. [...] With the Bartholomeans the case was different. In their refusal to conform they had a considerable body of lay supporters, who not only approved their action but also called for a continuance of their ministry under the forms of worship they were all agreed in preferring. The ejection thus resulted in the rise of organized Dissent.[43]

The history of these ejections was written in *Abridgement of Mr. Baxter's History of his Life and Times* (1702) by Edmund Calamy (1671-1732). Calamy wrote over three-hundred pages recording the names of the ejected clergy, contextualizing their fate in terms of their characters and biographies. This book was to have a profound influence on Theophilus Lindsey who stated 'I never was more affected with any book than with Calamy's History of those worthy confessors that gave up all in the cause of Christ, and for a good conscience, at the Restoration.'[44]

With growing concern in parliament that Charles II was Catholic (and who began accepting French subsidies) the Test Acts were introduced in order to keep Parliament from Catholic influence.[45] The Act of 1673 'imposed a sacramental test on all holders of civil and military offices under the crown', while the Act of 1678 required MPs to 'take oaths of allegiance and supremacy and subscribe to a declaration against

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[43] *Ibid.* p.xvi.
[44] Memoirs of Lindsey, p.42.
[45] *The Dissenters,* p.247.

transubstantiation and the adoration of the Virgin Mary and the saints.'[46] The Test Acts did not, therefore, affect the civil freedom of Protestant Trinitarian Dissenters, but for Roman Catholics and anti-Trinitarians, they were barred from holding any place of civil power. The divisions created within Dissent by these Acts were added to when the 1689 Toleration Act once more favoured Protestant Trinitarian Dissent:

> By the terms of the Act Protestant Trinitarian Dissenters who took the oaths of allegiance and supremacy and obtained a license for their meetings were exempt from the penalties of the Elizabethan Act of 1593 and the Conventicle Act of 1670 [simply a renewal of the 1664 Conventicle Act that had expired in 1669], and Nonconformist ministers who subscribed to thirty-six of the thirty-nine articles were exempt from the penalties of the Act of Uniformity and of the Five-Mile Act. [...] But Roman Catholics and any who denied the doctrine of the Trinity were specifically excluded from the benefits of the Act.[47]

The Elizabethan Act of 1593 or *An Act for Retaining the Queen's Subjects in their due Obedience* declared that 'anyone over the age of sixteen who refused to attend church for a month, or who attempted to persuade others not to attend church, or who attended unauthorized religious meetings, was to be committed to prison. If the offender did not conform within three months he was to be given the alternative of exile or death.'[48] The Toleration Act, therefore, restored religious freedom to Orthodox Dissenters whilst keeping their civil liberty restrained by the Corporation and Test Acts. Still, however, the religious liberty of Roman Catholics and Anti-Trinitarian Dissenters was restrained.

Although the above Parliamentary Acts from the latter part of the seventeenth century created the political and theological context for Unitarianism in the 1790s, there are two further ecclesiastical factors originating in the seventeenth century that would retain significance for the Unitarians at the end of the eighteenth century: The

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[46] *Ibid.* p.251-2.
[47] *Ibid.* pp.259-60.
[48] *Ibid.* p.39.

Book of Common Prayer (BCP), and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (the 'Articles'). The BCP established the liturgical formula for worship in churches and as stated above, the Uniformity Act demanded 'unfeigned assent and consent' by all clergy to the BCP. The BCP was the liturgical embodiment of the principles set forth in the Articles which expressed the theological and ecclesiastical position of the Church towards the end of Elizabeth's reign. They were based on Luther's *Augsburg Confession*, and had been drawn up specifically to curtail the power of Catholicism in Elizabethan England.

The Toleration Act demanded subscription to all but three of the Articles (articles 34, 35, and 36, relating to relatively minor matters, such as the 'book of homilies' and the 'book of consecration'), hence maintaining the force of the Clarendon Code and Test Acts on those like Unitarians who rejected the Trinity.[49] In addition to the subtly changing legal requirements, a number of universities decided to make subscription to the Articles a condition for matriculation.

Despite the political and social discrimination that would variously accompany a rejection of the state sponsored religion across Europe, a number of ministers throughout the continent began to air views rejecting the homoousios of Christ and the Father. The sect most influential upon Unitarianism was Socinianism, named after its founder Fausto Paulo Sozzini (1539-1604), known as Socinus. Socinus was hugely influential in the spread of anti-trinitarianism, moving away from his Roman Catholic roots in Tuscany, and settling in the relatively tolerant Poland. In Poland Socinus converted his views into an 'effective religious force' when he became the leader of the Minor Church:

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[49] *Lincoln*, p.213.

> Under the broadly accepted principles of freedom, reason and tolerance, [the Minor Church] develop[ed] a body of doctrine on a purely scriptural basis, in which it negatively rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and of the eternal divinity of Christ, yet positively gave Jesus a very high rank as one whose human nature approximated the divine, and whose teachings Christians are bound to accept literally and to follow strictly.[50]

Through poverty Socinus was unable to publish many of his works, but his influence grew when after his death his followers published a number of them, and formulated the Racovian Catechism under their influence in 1605. Amongst other things, the orator would,

> Affirm and confess, that no other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only God of Israel; and the man Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of a virgin, and no other besides him, is the only-begotten Son of God.[51]

The Racovian Catechism was important in the spread of Socinianism in England, as Michael Watts describes:

> Socinianism attracted a number of Englishmen during the intellectual turmoil of the 1640s and 1650s. Among them [...] [was] John Biddle, a Gloucestershire schoolmaster who published an English translation of the Racovian Catechism in 1652 and spent nearly ten years in prison for propagating Socinian doctrines. Biddle died in one of Charles II's gaols in 1662, but he left behind him a handful of converts, of whom the most important was the wealthy London silk merchant and philanthropist Thomas Firmin,[52] and it was Firmin who financed the publication of a series of anti-trinitarian tracts which appeared in the late 1680s and 1690s.[53]

Alexander Gordon claims that 'the term Unitarian had obtained currency through the pious zeal of Thomas Firmin', and Priestley (who wished to distinguish himself from

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[50] Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), pp.384-5.
[51] *Ibid.* p.408.
[52] Coincidentally Thomas Firmin was to become a governor of Coleridge's school, Christ's Hospital, in London, and was 'largely responsible for rebuilding it' after the fire of London. See, Raymond, V., Holt, *The Unitarian Contribution To Social Progress In England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), p.286.
[53] *The Dissenters*, p.372.

Socinianism due to his belief in the total humanity of Christ, and the Socinian belief that he 'approximated the divine') said that he had reclaimed the title from Biddle and Firmin.[54]

The Test Acts, obliging conformity to the Articles, remained a thorn in the side of dissenters throughout the eighteenth century, and a number of applications were made to parliament to abolish the requirement to subscribe. The 'Feather's Tavern Association' was a particularly significant attempt as far as the development of Unitarian worship is concerned:

> At a meeting of liberal clergy and laity, the 'Anti-Articularians' as they were named, at the Feathers Tavern in London, on 17 July 1771, a Petition [...] was drafted. It declared the belief of the petitioners in a natural right to the free exercise of their judgment in matters of religion: a natural right upon which the Reformation was founded and incompatible with the existence of the Thirty-nine Articles as a subscriptive creed. It opposed the Articles, too, as a cause of disunion between Protestants, while the laity among the petitioners complained of the University Test.[55]

The 'liberal clergy' among the petitioners suggested that 'a declaration of assent to the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures might be substituted in lieu of subscription to the thirty-nine articles and the book of Common Prayer.[56] Lindsey, at this point an Anglican minister, dedicated a great deal to this cause travelling 'upwards of two thousand miles' to rally support for the cause.[57] It went to parliament early in 1772, was unsuccessful, and settled Lindsey's mind on leaving the Church in order to establish his own Unitarian chapel. The failure of the Feather's Tavern Association in parliament was not without issue however:

> As a direct result of the debate on the Petition, two new movements for reform were set on foot—one, for the abolition of tests at the Universities, and another for the relief of

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[54] Alexander Gordon, *Heads of English Unitarian History* (London: Green, 1895), p.23. For Priestley's reclamation of the title 'Unitarian', cf. *Rutt* ii. 8.
[55] *Ideas of English Dissent*, pp.203-4.
[56] *Memoirs of Lindsey*, p.29.
[57] *Letters of Lindsey*, p.43

> Dissenters from subscription to the Articles of the Church of England as a condition of Toleration.[58]

Although these petitions would ultimately fail in the reactionary atmosphere of 1790s England, it was these movements that were active in Cambridge and London that attracted and influenced Coleridge.

[58] *Ibid.* p.45.

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Notes

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