

# Grundtvig and Coleridge: Heritage and Prophecy

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The intention of this article is to make a tentative comparison between Grundtvig and Coleridge in relation to the theme of heritage and prophecy. I am not the first on the English side to venture into this field. Already in the volume which had the title *Heritage and Prophecy*, David Jasper has made a preliminary exploration of the theme. This article of mine has been stimulated by two recent publications on Coleridge, one appearing last year in the United Kingdom, the other in the United States in 1995. They are, as will be seen, very different books, but both writers in their different ways are convinced of the actuality of Coleridge's writing for our own time.

The English publication was the second volume of Richard Holmes' literary biography of Coleridge, the first volume of which had been published in 1989. The genre of literary biography has been much practised in Britain in the last thirty or forty years. By common consent Richard Holmes' work on Coleridge, the first volume entitled *Early Visions*, the second *Darker Reflections*, has been recognised as an outstanding example of the genre. The American book is of a very different kind and as yet has received only a little notice on our side of the Atlantic. It is a careful, thorough study of the development of Coleridge's philosophical and religious thought, by an open-minded, sympathetic Roman Catholic scholar, Ronald C. Wendling. It has the title *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity: Experience and Authority in Religion and Faith*. As I shall remark later the title itself *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity* contains a kind of challenge within it.

Since both Grundtvig and Coleridge wrote very much, and much of what they wrote remains unpublished, and since both read even more, it is difficult to be sure whether or not they knew of one another; but I do not think that they did. Coleridge we know was aware of the work of Henrik Steffens. Grundtvig I am sure must have heard about Coleridge during his stay at Trinity College Cambridge in the summer of 1831. But we have no clear evidence that they were directly influenced by one another or had read one another's works.

I

Who was Coleridge? Let us start with his dates, 1772-1834. Eleven years older than Grundtvig he died at the age of sixty-four. He is one of the outstanding representatives of the first generation of romantic poetry in England. His early friendship and collaboration with Wordsworth, a collaboration which at the beginning was of the greatest importance to them both is a kind of legendary moment in the history of English romanticism. But whereas Wordsworth's life was long, distinguished and in his latter years notably calm, Coleridge's life soon became disorganised and then for a time chaotic. Coleridge, as we shall see, was a man of enormous gifts, intellectual, imaginative and social. At times his genius seems to have made him overconfident. More often however it had the reverse effect, causing him to lack confidence in himself and to become acutely aware of his evident inability to organise the practical aspects of his life.

If anyone needed the support of an understanding wife and family, it was Coleridge. Unfortunately the person he married could not adapt herself to the eccentricities, the waywardness, the unexpectedness of her genius of a husband. It was not her fault; but after the first years of married life they were never able to live together. They maintained a kind of contact with one another and managed to some extent to collaborate in the bringing up of their children. But the wound on both sides was deep and there was never any full reconciliation.

One of the reasons why the marriage broke down was that already in his twenties Coleridge was becoming addicted to opium and from his late twenties onwards he had an addiction which he learned to control but never to break. For a time, in the first years of the nineteenth century, his life became almost completely fragmented. A turning point came in 1816 when he put himself into the hands of a young and well-known London physician, James Gilman, asking for a period of what we might call detoxification.

Coleridge came to live in the house of the Gilmans so that his movements could be controlled and his intake of drugs gradually and firmly reduced. The arrangement was intended in the beginning to last for three to six months. In the end it lasted for eighteen years. Coleridge stayed with the Gilman family until his death in 1834, becoming an honoured and evidently beloved member of the household, cared for both by Gilman and his wife, a kind of grandfather figure for the Gilman children. It was this remarkable and unexpected arrangement

which enabled Coleridge, in the last years of his life, to complete a number of important prose works on social, cultural and political themes as well as on purely literary questions. In this period he established himself as a major figure in the English intellectual world. In a fascinating way in the last decade of his life he gathered around himself a group of much younger men, some of whom were to be major influences in the development of nineteenth century British thinking.

Coleridge was without question a very great poet. He has written two of the most famous poems in the English language, *Kubla Khan*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but his life was so fragmented that his reputation over the last two centuries has also been in some ways fragmented and uncertain. Apart from his gifts as a poet, his authority as a literary critic has always been recognised and more or less unchallenged. Still today many of the basic lines of Shakespearean criticism have their origin in him. But his later philosophical, cultural and religious writings have been very variously estimated. Moreover they have only begun to be fully appreciated in the last forty or so years since only within that time has it been possible to see them in relation to all the unpublished material which has gradually been brought to light. From this new period in the study of Coleridge which has developed since World War II, two things are, I think, universally recognised. First, that Coleridge was a man of prodigiously wide learning, and secondly that he was a man of penetrating and prophetic insight into human psychology. It was the combination of psychological and literary interests in the nineteen fifties which first provided the impetus for the publication of the hitherto unpublished notebooks and papers.

No-one can deny that as he got older Coleridge's strictly theological interests got constantly stronger. How is that development to be seen? Needless to say many of Coleridge's commentators have seen these later religious interests as a sign of decline, the tragic defeat of a brilliant, radical, courageous spirit, a slow retreat into conventional, traditional forms of Christianity. Of course that view has not been universal, and in Holmes' biography, although much of Coleridge's specifically theological interest escapes the writer, the later development of his religious thought is treated with respect and sympathy and Coleridge's religious commitment is seen as an integral part of the later stabilisation of his life. But, as I have suggested already, the title of Wendling's specifically theological study, *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity* sounds a distinct challenge. This is not the usual view.

Let us ask again why we should bring Grundtvig into comparison with Coleridge and Coleridge into comparison with Grundtvig? Both men are poets, both men are religious thinkers, both men are for all the difference in their interests and activities, remarkably *unified* thinkers. They are of course near contemporaries and they are facing similar intellectual, cultural and spiritual conditions. Some of the ways in which they may be compared have been set out by David Jasper in the article to which I have referred and to which I now turn.

»Perhaps most obviously both men had an almost unparalleled range of intellectual and theological interests; both were, in Coleridge's term 'library cormorants', yet equally they never lost sight of the practical necessities of existence. For Coleridge, such practical necessities could not be separated from an intense absorption in epistemology and theories of knowledge ('I revered Immanuel Kant with my whole heart and soul', he once wrote), which, in turn, arose out of the underlying theological implications of both his poetic and his speculative activities. Richard Holmes... has recently indicated how the early 'conversation' poems continually move beyond a young poet's natural interest in the problem of personal authenticity to questions of whether life, or literature, can have real meaning without some form of divine continuity or assurance within the structure of reality. Does language itself ultimately depend on the notion of divine articulation within the universe? From whence does its power arise?«<sup>1</sup>

One of the evident points which Grundtvig and Coleridge have in common and which emerges in this passage is the immediate connection between intellectual and practical consideration which both make. Both, in their different ways are what we now might call existential thinkers. But if we want to compare them we must look more closely at their way of doing things. There is something in their way of thinking, in their way of being, curiously similar despite all the evident contrasts between them. Both were brilliant and excessive talkers who could hold the attention of unexpected audiences. Both were brilliant, unexpected lecturers who could improvise in the most astounding way. In both intellect and imagination were vividly alive and closely interacting. Let us for a moment look at how Coleridge actually talked. Here we have him in 1810 in conversation with Henry Crabbe Robinson, a well-known London journalist and literary critic, one of the few people in the London of that time who knew Germany something in the way in which Coleridge knew it.

»In December Robinson recorded how they compared their experiences of Germany and the Mediterranean. They talked widely of warfare, politics and religious beliefs, and particularly of German authors: of Tieck (whom Coleridge had met in Rome), of Schiller and Goethe (whom Robinson had met at Jena); of Kant's philosophy and its recent developments by Fichte and Schelling. Robinson was struck by how Coleridge's wide reading was constantly modulated by his own personal experiences, without any touch of the academic, but as matters deeply lived through and felt. The most obscure German metaphysics were continuously subjected to imaginative testing.

»One of Coleridge's favoured methods was to 'unpack' a philosophical proposition in terms of its psychological or religious truth. Discussing Kant's theory of the categorical imperative, he thought it inadequate as a motive for moral action in daily life. »Mere knowledge of the right, we find by experience, does not suffice to ensure the performance of the right - for mankind in general.« Men were inevitably »sick and weak in their moral being«. The recognition of duty exclusively was not a sufficient »motive to the performance«. »Much less shall we be led to our duty by calculation of pleasant or harmful consequences.«

»A wealth of personal suffering lay behind that remark, but Coleridge made it universal. Selfish promises and threats were the very ground which destroyed true altruism. To behave altruistically towards someone else, one must first behave generously towards oneself, in a striking imaginative leap, Coleridge combined the two. »The more the selfish principle is set into fermentation, the more imperious and despotic does the present moment become - till at length to love our future self is almost as hard as to love our neighbour - it is indeed only a difference of space and time. My neighbour is my other self, *othered* by space - my old age is to my youth another self, *othered* by time.«

»Coleridge concluded that there must be a psychological medium between »mere conviction and resolve« and »suitable action«. Since there was no medium in nature, it must be found in the spiritual world. »This medium is found in prayer, and religious intercommunion between man and his maker. Hence the necessity of prayer.«<sup>2</sup>

In this passage it is striking to notice, first Coleridge's admiration for Kant, an admiration that does not prevent him from wanting to go further than Kant, and second his emphasis on the importance of prayer already in a general conversation in 1810.

Coleridge was then a very fascinating talker, and it may be instructive to see him later in life in the context of a family circle. Here the impressions come from his nephew John, at that time an undergraduate at Oxford.

»At dinner in the mid-afternoon Coleridge became wrapped in scientific conversation with another guest, Professor Steven Rigaud, who was director of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. But when the May's little children were allowed in to join the adults he instantly broke off.... John was greatly struck by Coleridge's quick rapport with the children becoming noisy and playful, even to the point of embarrassment.

»But the most extraordinary affect was produced afterwards at tea in the parlour. Coleridge and Professor Rigaud launched into a »discussion of Kant's System of Metaphysics«. Respectful silence fell over the »little knots of company«, the tea things were removed, and John expected to see the women slipping away from such »abstruse and exclusively male talk... but something about Coleridge's voice held them back, it was so ready, so energetic and so eloquent, and his explanations of the famous 'subjective' and 'objective' became 'so very neat and apposite' that they were gradually drawn in, engaged, and finally transfixed, hovering behind his chair and settling at his feet.

»The Oxford undergraduate could scarcely believe it: »they were really entertained with Kant's Metaphysics!« In retrospect it seemed almost the most memorable moment of the whole weekend, particularly as there were several pretty young women among them, these ladies »loitering most attentively, and being really uncommonly entertained with a long discussion of two hours on the deepest metaphysics...«<sup>3</sup>

We may remember how, in his later years, Grundtvig was often surrounded by groups of female admirers. He also had the gift of unpacking philosophy and theology, making topics intelligible to those who had no specialised knowledge of them, above all by explaining and illustrating abstract concepts by way of vivid poetic images.

Perhaps we begin to see ways in which Grundtvig and Coleridge may illuminate one another. Both were men of great poetic imagination and at the same time of great intellectual power. For both of them the poetic image and the abstract concept lay very close together and this fact gave to their writing and talking its very particular quality. There are passages in Richard Holmes' exposition of Coleridge's view of literary matters where I find myself thinking immediately of Poul Borum's study of Grundtvig as a poet. This comparison inevitably sug-

gests itself in relation to the question of whether the poet imagination is to be thought of as primarily active or passive.

Richard Holmes quotes a famous passage from Coleridge on this subject, »Most of my readers will have observed a small water insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow, fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; but this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive (in philosophical language we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the imagination...)«.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Holmes comments »The psychology of this passage is remarkably modern. It seems to describe the actual process of creative inspiration without resorting to the traditional idea of a Muse. Instead it proposes a model of the engagement between the conscious forward drive of intellectual effort (propulsion), and the drifting backwards into unconscious materials (yielding to the current) constantly repeated in a natural diastolic movement, like breathing or heartbeat. This is how creativity actually works: a mental (ultimately spiritual) rhythm which arises from the primary physical conditions of the natural world.«<sup>5</sup> Inevitably one is led to reflect on Grundtvig's discussion of this same question of whether the poetic mind is active or passive and his decision that it must be both.<sup>6</sup>

As an older commentator on Coleridge as a thinker has said »Coleridge's thought demands for its recognition - and it is a recognition not usually accorded - that his intellectual endeavour constitutes an organic unity. There is in reality no tripartite division of rhapsodic poet, maundering metaphysician and pious theologian; the same Coleridge philosophises, poetises and theologises, and furthermore the different fields of his interests are mutually interdependent - his poetry, both in theory and in practice, is essentially, not accidentally, involved with his philosophy, and his philosophy is reciprocally bound up with his theological interests.«<sup>7</sup> Granted all the difference in importance between the various elements in their work it may be said that this quality is to be seen in both of them. In Grundtvig's writing whether as poet,

theologian, practical man, historian, it is always the same mind at work, the same mind which if it is not systematic is yet in a way remarkably coherent.

## II

Now to come to Ronald Wendling's study of Coleridge as a religious thinker. I have already commented on the first part of its title. »*Coleridge's Progress to Christianity*.« The second part of the title is also significant. »*Experience and Authority in Religious Faith*.« For religious faith to be firmly established the writer argues, it needs not only the witness of inner experience, of human need and human aspiration and longing, but also the given objective witness, both of scriptures and of the historic tradition of the universal community of faith. Coleridge moved through his inward philosophical approach to Christian truth, to a final acknowledgement of the need for a historic, universal Church. He writes in one place »The existing Grounds and Pillars of the Church itself remain, 1) the universal tradition of the Churches and 2) *Ostensio e Scripturis*, in other word the scriptures interpreted according to the constant belief of the Church in all ages.« or as he writes in another place »My fixed principle is: that a Christianity without a Church exercising spiritual authority is vanity and dissolution.«<sup>8</sup>

What amazed and even shocked some of Coleridge's younger friends and admirers, for instance Carlyle, was that he had arrived, not at some generalised religious affirmation, but at the classical position of the Anglican scholars and theologians of the seventeenth century with their complementarity of scripture and tradition. The way in which he had arrived at that position is not exactly Grundtvig's in 1825, but there are certainly similarities in the positions to which they came. Coleridge himself could be amused at the way in which he had found himself back again in classical seventeenth and eighteenth century theology. Another nephew, Henry Nelson, Coleridge said, »Mr Coleridge's admiration of Bull and Waterland as high theologians was very great. Bull he used to read in the Latin *Defensio Fidei Nicaenae*, using the Jesuit Zola's edition of 1784, which I think he bought at Rome. He told me once, that when he was reading a Protestant English Bishop's work on the Trinity in a copy edited by an Italian Jesuit in



Italy, he felt proud of the Church of England and in good humour with the Church in Rome.«<sup>9</sup>

Wendling's book is basically a close study of the intellectual development which brought Coleridge to this position. »It follows the history of the important influences on his mind and the stages of his struggle with those influences as he emerged into the Trinitarian Christianity of his middle and later years.« Wendling points out that the emphasis of his book is »throughout is on the simultaneous modernity and Christian orthodoxy of Coleridge's mind - incompatible characteristics in the view of those who view his Christian faith more as a refuge from uncertainty than an honest solution to his problems. Such has been the critical attitude behind most claims of Coleridge's so-called decline.... My argument is, on the contrary that he grew into a philosophical understanding of Christianity, that sympathetically understood, speaks directly to the late twentieth century situation.«<sup>10</sup>

Here, Wendling is making what I can only see as a very interesting and very important assertion. In pointing to the »simultaneous modernity and Christian orthodoxy of Coleridge's mind,« he shows us the root cause of the constant uncertainty which has marked attempts to give a theological assessment of Coleridge's position and influence in the development of Anglican thought in the nineteenth century. Is he to be understood as a liberal thinker, the father of the English broad church movement? Or is he to be understood as a conservative thinker, a hidden inspirer of the Oxford movement? Both views have been held. Both have elements of truth in them, both are finally quite insufficient to a full understanding of the man.

By claiming that Coleridge's development, his progress to Christianity is of direct relevance to our late twentieth century situation however, Wendling goes further. He stresses that there is something in our present situation, intellectual and spiritual, when the period of the *Aufklärung*, the epoch of the French revolution, seems to have run its course, which enables us to see the full boldness and scope of Coleridge's endeavour. This is an endeavour not to go back but to go forward to Christian orthodoxy, not to ignore the developments of natural science, nor the achievements of Kant's philosophy and all that follows from then, but to go through them and beyond them to a reaffirmation of faith which will also be a new affirmation of faith.

Here I think there are claims for a new understanding of Coleridge, which can be paralleled by some of the suggestions which have arisen from time to time in our growing international discussion of Grundtvig,

during the last ten years. Perhaps it is in their implicit attitude towards the questions which will be raised by the third millennium, that we shall find it most useful to compare these two strange, compelling and, in some ways, prophetic men.

In their own time, in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, Coleridge and Grundtvig, the one in England the other in Denmark, stood as it were on the edge of the European world. Both had been deeply influenced, indeed strongly inspired by some of the voices which came to them from the spiritual and intellectual ferment which marked the Germany of their time. Both were willing and eager to learn from that ferment. But both in the end found that they wanted to go further than their German teachers. And both found that if they wanted to go further they would also need to go back. So both, again in very different ways, found themselves appealing to the historic faith, the worship, the witness of the Churches in England and in Denmark in which they had been baptised and which represented for them the one historic community of Christian prayer and faith and life, in which they heard the Word of life. In reclaiming the heritage of the Church both in very different ways found themselves claiming to be prophetic, to have a word about the future as well as about the present and the past.

Now I have to admit that when I began to prepare this article I had not foreseen that this was where it would end. I am still not sure how strongly I want to make its final and perhaps too triumphalist affirmation. But then it certainly never occurred to me when I set out on this originally limited exercise, that on my visit to Denmark in February this year, I should discover that the European community had decided to take Grundtvig in succession to Socrates as the figurehead of its next five years of adult educational endeavour. What in the corridors of Brussels lies behind that, in many ways, strange and in some ways, almost comic decision I do not of course know, but this sudden projection of Grundtvig's name into the centre of the European community can hardly be a matter of total indifference to anyone who thinks that Grundtvig, like Coleridge, may be a thinker who still has things to say to our world, a man who still belongs to the world of public discourse and common human concern.

*Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> *Heritage and Prophecy: Grundtvig and the English-Speaking World*. Edited by A.M. Allchin, D. Jasper, J.H. Schjørring & K. Stevenson, (Aarhus, 1993), pp. 104-5.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections*. (London 1998), pp. 224-5.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247-8.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.
- <sup>6</sup> *Heritage and Prophecy*, pp. 96-97. Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen, 'Grundtvig's Poetics'. Grundtvig proposed the term 'the deponent poet', to describe the poet who combines the two qualities.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, (Oxford, 1980), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.
- <sup>8</sup> Ronald C. Wendling, *Coleridge's Progress to Christianity: Experience and Authority in Religious Faith*, (London, 1995), p. 181 & p. 237.
- <sup>9</sup> McFarland, p. 390.
- <sup>10</sup> Wendling, pp. 20-21.