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RELIGION AND CIVILIZATION IN COLERIDGE'S AIDS TO REFLECTION AND ON THE CONSTITUTION OF CHURCH AND STATE

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to explore the connections between religion and civilization in two Coleridgean prose works: Aids to Reflection, and more specifically, On the Constitution of Church and State. Interestingly, S. T. Coleridge has defined civilization as a civilizing process, which makes him a forerunner of Norbert Elias. Yet Coleridge was a critical, but more religious-oriented than Elias had been. On a par with Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, S. T. Coleridge thought that the Church should be maintained as an institution, but that its educational role in society should be rethought. Halfway through Coleridge's Aids to Reflection, one comes across a standard Enlightenment and Romantic critique of the Church as the institution that seized truth and knowledge with a tight grip, as the Pharisees had once done, by denying the light of knowledge from reaching the believers. This view is balanced by the fact that Coleridge believes theology to be the root and trunk of all knowledge. The clerisy comprised both clerics and lay professors whose purpose was to cultivate the English nation and raise men that would themselves promote civilization. The religious and cultural aspects of the clerisy must be understood as whole, as their starting point is common. The two terms often appear together, but Coleridge explains the transition from the the religious to the cultural turn historically; in the Middle Ages, the priests also had the role of educators, whereas in modern times the educational role was taken up by the teacher. If Coleridge is sympathetic towards the idea of an intellectual, political, educational and ultimately religious establishment, Kant develops a negative idea of the so-called guardians of society, be they intellectuals, doctors or priests. In order to do justice to Coleridge's thought, one may affirm that, although he was more prolific in his prose concerning religious and political subjects, a crossover between literature and politics remains a salient feature in Coleridgean studies.*

Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* is permeated by the Augustinian tradition. From the "Address to Reader" onwards, Christianity is given a primary importance: "But you are likewise born in a CHRISTIAN land: and Revelation has provided for you new subjects for reflection, and new treasures of knowledge, never to be unlocked by him who remains self-ignorant" (Coleridge, *Aids* xix). By authoring *Confessions* and *The City of God*, St. Augustine established a scholarly tradition that singles out religion "as a powerful force in the civilizing project" (Goudsblom 270). While, in the *Confessions*, Augustine writes his own conversion narrative, in *The City of God*, he describes the blessings of Christianity for humanity at large, offering history a theological synthesis (cf. Goudsblom 270-271). In their versions of the civilizing process, Elias and Weber take a different

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approach to the Augustinian tradition, Elias ignoring religion and Weber describing it objectively, although he personally did not sympathize with it.

Writers and scholars writing in the Augustinian tradition evince “a persistent tendency to conceive of the civilizing process in terms of providence and teleology – as if that process has always been guided by a divine or otherwise transcendental plan” (Goudeblom 275). Furthermore, “it has given pride of place to the church or, more broadly, to religion as the driving force in the entire process” (Goudeblom 275). As we shall see, Coleridge analyzes the Church critically and creatively. Although he finds the institution indispensable, he nevertheless underlines its educational and formative social potential, offering a twist to the standard Enlightenment critique of the Church as a punitive and pastoral force.

Halfway through Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* (1825), one comes across a standard Enlightenment and Romantic critique of the Church as the institution that seized truth and knowledge with a tight grip, as the Pharisees had once done, by denying the light of knowledge from reaching the believers. Immanuel Kant adopts a similar stance in two of his works – “What is Enlightenment?” and *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. Coleridge’s shifting intellectual position on the subject of *the clerisy* will be analyzed in two primary works: *Aids to Reflection* and *On the Constitution of Church and State*. Focusing on the Early Church, Coleridge makes the following assertion about the “Speculative Systems” that hindered believers in their quest to find God:

Too soon did the Doctors of the Church forget that the *heart*, the *moral* nature, was the beginning and the end; and that truth, knowledge and insight were comprehended in its expansion. This was the true and first apostasy – when in council and synod, the Divine Humanities of the Gospel gave way to Speculative Systems, and Religion became a Science of Shadows under the name of Theology, or at best a bare Skeleton of Truth, without life or interest, a like inaccessible and unintelligible to the majority of Christians. (Coleridge, *Aids* 126)

As opposed to the familiar philosophic picture Coleridge adopts in *Aids to Reflection*: correlating the categories of Truth, Knowledge and Insight with the understanding or reason, in this excerpt he seems to argue that there is a hermeneutics that stems from the heart or the moral nature. The heart or the moral nature should not be conflated, but what Coleridge implies is that the heart is the locus of moral enlightenment, while the moral nature is its ultimate end.

In turn, this approach can be coupled with his aversion towards dogmatizing that led to the Science of Shadows, a theology that remained alien to the majority of Christians. As a consequence of the early Church’s excessive dogmatizing, ordinary Christians were left with rites and ceremonies empty of the reflective abilities Coleridge insists so much on throughout the book. Although both Kant and Coleridge criticized the Church’s monopoly over knowledge and truth, both felt that the institution of the Church must be maintained. This idea is illustrated in Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, more specifically in the section entitled “The Idea of a People of God cannot be realized (by Human Organization) except in the form of a Church”.

As for Coleridge, his insistence on maintaining the institution alive is rendered in Aphorism XIV on spiritual religion, in a footnote where he clearly states that “a Christianity without a Church Exercising Spiritual authority is Vanity and Dissolution” (Coleridge, *Aids* 200). Coleridge’s statement deserves more attention, since not only does he claim that Christianity does not exist without a Church, but also that if the Church is maintained, it has the duty to properly exercise a type of Spiritual authority. In Coleridge’s sense, this can only be achieved by divines such as Bishop Leighton, Thomas More or Richard Hooker who did more than exercise pastoral power – they also invite believers to reflect upon the fundamental truths of Christianity. In order to clarify the undogmatic character of the Bible that the doctors of the Church mentioned by Coleridge were incapable of understanding, I would like to bring into discussion another fragment from the same work:

The Gospel is not a system of Theology, nor a syntagma of theoretical propositions and conclusions for the enlargement of speculative knowledge, ethical or metaphysical. But it is a history, a series of facts and events related or announced. (Coleridge, *Aids* 136)

The vanity of dogmatizing theme is yet another seventeenth century cultural topos attributed to Glanvill’s *The Vanity of Dogmatizing or Confidence in Opinions Manifested in a Discourse of the Shortness and Uncertainty of our Knowledge* (1661). It is worth noting that the author’s aim was to justify experimental philosophy according to Baconian empiricism, while also having in mind man’s postlapsarian condition.

Coleridge performs a balancing act between discrediting religious fanaticism (the so-called enthusiasts), while proposing a brand of Christianity that centers on the lived experience of the incarnate Christ. As opposed to Glanvill, who justified man’s uncertainty of opinions by appealing to the Fall episode from Genesis, Coleridge believes that man’s inclination towards either religious fanaticism or atheism is ultimately a question of our misuse of the faculties of the understanding and reason. This discussion goes back at least to Francis Bacon, but it was given an important turn by Immanuel Kant, according to whom the understanding deals with cognition, while Reason is a watchdog of “the understanding’s manifold cognitions”, establishing “a priori unity through concepts” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 353).

In a similar tone to that of *Aids to Reflection*, “the middle” Coleridge of 1817 is also aware that an elite group of thinkers withheld knowledge from the less privileged. It would have been interesting if Coleridge were more specific or if he would have given an example of such a forcibly withholding of knowledge. However, the passage below from chapter nine of *Biographia literaria* is a good indication of a continuation of this interest in asserting the need for a responsible clerisy coupled with a need to educate the masses:

Therefore the true depth of science, and the penetration to the inmost centre, from which all the lines of knowledge diverge to their ever distance circumference, was abandoned to the illiterate and the simple, whom unstilled learning and an original ebullency of spirit had urged to the investigation of the indwelling and living ground of things. These then, because their names had never been inrolled in the guilds of the learned, were persecuted by the registered livery-men as interloper on their rights and privileges. All without distinction were branded as fanatics and phantasts . . . (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 148-9)

These “fanatics and phantasts” Coleridge invokes were religious leaders who did not benefit from a formal education, people like the Quaker George Fox or Jakob Boehme, whom Hegel praised in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1821), and welcomed his rediscovery by the critics:

In Bacon we had an English lord chancellor, in Boehme we have a German shoemaker; the former is commander in chief of external philosophizing, the latter stands in direct opposition to it. Boehme’s style has long been forgotten. He was labelled an enthusiast, and only in more recent times has he been restored to honor . . . (Hegel 79)

Coleridge, in a way, doubts the canonicity of the philosophic corpus. He was an acid critic of Locke’s empiricism and Hartley’s associationism; in this passage, however, Coleridge is making a case for marginal philosophers that are equally eligible of drawing water from the same fountain as the canonic “priests of learning”:

And this for no other reason but because they were the unlearned, men of humble and obscure occupations. . . . The haughty priests of learning not only banished from the schools and marts of science all who had dared draw living waters from the fountain, but drove them out of the very Temple, which meantime the “buyers, and sellers and money-changers” were suffered to make “a den of thieves”. (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 149)

Coleridge undergoes yet another change of heart concerning religious sectarianism when he proposes an idea of a clerisy that should be made up of learned men from “all denominations”. In *Aids to Reflection*, he had condemned Jakob Behmen. In his last published work during his lifetime, however, Coleridge is more tolerant, seeking a solution for educating the masses. *On the Constitution of Church and State* (1829) attempts to underline that a clerisy advocates the national interest of the state, this interest being of a social, cultural, religious and ultimately, of a political nature. Coleridge has in mind all these roles the clerisy must fulfill. These can be discussed together, as they are all intertwined. Thus, the social role is defined by the spread of knowledge to the less privileged members of society. The clerisy itself benefits from such an approach, as it has only to gain from the increasing membership within its ranks. In this manner, Coleridge states, the clerisy maintains the principle of Hope in the more humble families and, at the same time, conserving the wealth of the rich and noble (cf. Coleridge, *Church and State* 74).

The religious and cultural aspects of the clerisy must be understood as whole, as their starting point is common. The hasty reader may confuse one term for another, as the two terms often appear together, but Coleridge explains the transition from the religious to the cultural turn historically; in the Middle Ages, the priests also had the role of educators, whereas in modern times the educational role was taken up by the teacher. Another important aspect worth mentioning is that this clerisy can be equated with the National Church. The difference between a member of the clerisy and a member of the clergy is that the former had a predominantly ethical role, whereas the latter has a spiritual role:

religion may be an indispensable ally, but is not the essential constitutive end of the national institute, which is unfortunately, at least improperly, styled the Church; a name

which in its best sense is exclusively appropriate to the Church of Christ. (Coleridge, *Church and State* 48)

Theology has a historical importance, Coleridge underlines, being „the root and trunk of the knowledges” (Coleridge, *Church and State* 46). The intellectual climate of the English Romantic Age, as Stephen Prickett observes, could be characterized by the tension between the “moribund religious institutions and the reaction of the believers against them” (Prickett 121). Although the Anglican Church was indeed criticized by Coleridge or Wordsworth, this does not mean that they lacked “high moral expectations” (Prickett 121). The clerisy then, has a role of promoting people on the basis of meritocracy and also a role in maintaining privileges already gained by the nobility. As scholar Peter Allen has rightly asserted, climbing up the social ladder which the clerisy facilitates makes the latter something more complex than an establishment whose sole interest is that of mediating culture and ideas, a fact for which the concept of clerisy has received criticism: “The possibility of social advancement by assimilation with this class is the most obvious example of the fact that the social role of an intellectual establishment is never simply a matter of the transmission of ideas” (Allen 102). To return to Coleridge’s discussion of *ecclesia*, the philosopher affirmed he would have preferred to use the word “*enclesia*”, as it would have designated a group of people chosen from a specific realm, namely England (*in* to specific surroundings), rather than called out of a place, the meaning of “*ecclesia*” (cf. Coleridge, *Church and State* 48).

Finally, the cultural argument of the clerisy consists in maintaining and promoting civilization with the help of the principle of freedom. It is not coercion that should prompt citizens to fulfill their civic duties, but the principle of freedom:

The proper object and end of the national Church is civilization with freedom; and the duty of its ministers, could they be contemplated merely and exclusively as officiators of the national Church, would be fulfilled in the communication of that degree and kind of knowledge to all, the possession of which is necessary for all in order to their civility. (Coleridge, *Church and State* 58)

As far as Coleridge’s overall political intention in this work, his tory discourse backs the Anglican establishment within the universities. One of the features of his discourse is the intolerance against Irish Catholics with just one year before Lord Liverpool and George IV approved of *The Catholic Relief Bill* amid growing pressure from the Irish (cf. Jones, 39). Coleridge reminds the readers of Papist abuses during the Middle Ages or of the Catholic priests’ discrediting of marriage:

The marriage tie is a bond the preclusion of which by an antecedent obligation, that overrules the accidents of individual character and is common to the whole order, deprives the State of a security with which it cannot dispense. (Coleridge, *Church and State* 83)

Moreover, marriage is a „bond, which more than all other ties connects the citizen with his country” (Coleridge, *Church and State* 78).

Coleridge opts for the concept of cultivation in order to render the harmonious development of the qualities and faculties that characterize humanity. This cultivation takes place within the frame of the civilizing process,¹ or, as Coleridge himself calls it, “a continuing and progressive civilization” (Coleridge, *Church and State* 46). However, civilization is not only invested with positive traits. On the contrary, civilization may, in fact, be harmful:

civilization is itself but a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people, where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity. (Coleridge, *Church and State* 46)

From this definition, it remains unclear what the qualities of a polished people should consist in. However, cultivation is deemed to be an indispensable part of the process of civilization. Contrary to French philosophes, who did not recognize “the fragility of civil society”, but only denounced forms of authority “superstition, priestcraft, error and prejudice of every kind” (Mill, “Coleridge” 132), Coleridge firmly stated that “civilization is but a mixed good” that needs a clergy to guide common citizens to enlightenment.

One of Coleridge’s Victorian admirers is John Stuart Mill, who provided his contemporaries a balanced account of his multi-faceted thought. In Mill’s essay entitled “Coleridge”, the Victorian philosopher presents Coleridge’s philosophy in the following manner:

It expresses the revolt of the human mind against the philosophy of the eighteenth century. It is ontological, because that was experimental; conservative, because that was innovative; religious, because so much of that was infidel; concrete and historical, because that was abstract and metaphysical; poetical, because that was matter-of-fact and prosaic. (Mill 125)

Commenting on Coleridge’s *Constitution of Church and State*, Mill is intrigued by the role of Church Establishment. The Church Establishment implies, according to Coleridge, “the reservation of a portion of the land” for “the advancement of knowledge, and the civilization and cultivation of the community” (Mill 147). This fund is called by Coleridge “the nationality” (Coleridge, *Church and State* 33), and it was meant to be used in didactic purposes. *Aids to Reflection* is also a didactic work, meant to be an address to a virtual classroom: “we are in the silent school of Reflection, in the secret confessional of Thought” (Coleridge, *Aids* 200). The role Coleridge attributes to this clergy must be understood in the context of the cultural mutation from *religion* to *religiosity* in the eighteenth century, especially in the German Enlightenment, as theological dogmas were downgraded “to the status of myths, whereas Christianity persisted as a religion of private use”, each individual’s private affair (Koselleck 109).

¹ The civilizing process is a term coined by the sociologist Norbert Elias, in his 1936 book entitled *The Civilizing Process: the history of manners*.

The learned people of all denominations, such is the generous palette Coleridge has in mind. As far as the pair religion - religiosity is concerned, *Aids to Reflection* represents a proper response to the more renowned *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, written by Immanuel Kant in 1793. Although Coleridge is on a par with Kant when it comes to the introspective, private character of Christianity, Coleridge does not choose a “natural” approach to religion, but a decisively spiritual approach (spiritual religion), in which the human subject can still relate to divine grace, a feature that is not to be found in the work of the German philosopher. In any case, culture and religion (or religiosity) are called upon to counteract the so-called societies for spreading knowledge that treat man as a mechanism: “What are all these Mechanics’ Institutions, Societies for Spreading Knowledge, &c but so many confessions of the necessity & of the absence of a *National Church?*” (Coleridge, *Church and State* 66).

In the words of the American social scientist Chris Jenks, Coleridge was the one who liberated culture, and, with John Ruskin, came to be associated with the arts (cf. Jenks 14). This was also possible by introducing the notion of clerisy, “a secular church” (Jenks 14). The situation is in fact more complex, since Coleridge is an intellectual with tory affinities with a readership highly interested in religious matters and debates. Also, it becomes quite clear that the existence and the growth of a clerisy, thus of an elite group, is in the best interest of the state; and this national interest has a social, cultural, religious and political dimension attached to it.

To conclude, there are still unsolved puzzles in *On the Constitution of Church and State*, one of them being the way in which the clerisy should operate. As signaled by Peter Allen, “one wishes that he (Coleridge) had left us not only this general theory of the clerisy’s ultimate purpose, but a more realistic account of its actual operation and in particular that he had developed the insights sketched out in his manuscript fragment on the early priesthood” (Allen 95). In Coleridge’s account of the clerisy, it is easy to notice its interest “in the existing social order but not the way it can be seen to modify that order by the pursuit of its own distinct interests” (Allen 95). Referring to the context of Coleridge’s age, Peter Allen further comments on the historical context of Coleridge’s time:

the intellectual establishment of Coleridge’s time was not only a network designed to preserve and disseminate the officially approved forms of national culture, but a powerful bureaucracy constantly engaged in internal and external warfare. Conservative, liberal and radical schools of thought struggled to counteract one another within the system and struggled for influence over the opinions of the educated public. (Allen 96)

Coleridge did not foresee the spectacular expansion of the middle class in the Victorian Age, in an environment that was turning increasingly urban and industrialized. The Progressive aspect of the state, in Coleridgean terms, i.e. the middle class, would gain greater political importance, coupled with social and cultural respectability. He also wanted to belong to the clerisy and, throughout his career, he gained that status. A promising Classical scholar in his youth, he dropped out of Cambridge University in 1794 (cf. Sarker 44), but was helped by the Wedgwood annuity, a friend’s grant, as he struggled, then being just a young writer (Vickers 75). Peter Allen also comments on

Coleridge's struggles up the social ladder: "Coleridge's early failure to join the clerisy led him to venture into the public market for intellectual goods and services. For many years – as journalist, author, and public lecturer – he tried to interest the public in his moral and intellectual stock in trade" (Allen 103). Although he was particularly well perceived as a lecturer on topics pertaining to literature and philosophy, "his addiction to opium made him a most unreliable performer" (Allen 103). In 1824, however, one year before he published his *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge "became one of the ten Royal Associates of the recently founded Royal Society of Literature, with an annuity of 100 guineas that came directly from George IV" (Allen 103).

To return to the quote from *Biographia literaria* about the conflict between established clerisy and the emerging clerisy, Coleridge opined that "the haughty priests of learning not only banished from the schools and marts of science all who had dared draw living waters from the fountain, but drove them out of the very Temple" (Coleridge, *Biographia literaria* 149). In stating this, he did not take the consequences into account, as Ben Knights rightly observes: "When he came to formulate the idea of the clerisy, Coleridge would have done well to reflect on this very danger. For he gives no reason to think that his own clerisy would not be capable of a similar or even greater treason" (Ben Knights 71). If Coleridge is sympathetic towards the idea of an intellectual, political, educational and ultimately religious establishment, Kant develops a negative idea of the so-called "guardians" of society, be they intellectuals, doctors or priests:

It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who judges my diet for me, and so forth, surely I do not need to trouble myself. I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me. Those guardians, who have graciously taken up the oversight of mankind, take care that the far greater part of mankind (including the entire fairer sex) regard the step to maturity as not only difficult, but also very dangerous. (Kant, "What is Enlightenment" 58)

The language used in the passage is ironic, rendering the guardians service providers, either mending a soul or a conscience. Money enters and nourishes a scheme of ignorance: "I have no need to think, if only I can pay; others will take over the tedious business for me" (Kant, "What is Enlightenment" 58).

With respect to the criticism he developed during his prolific literary career, one should be aware, as Terry Eagleton signals, of the gap between aesthetics and politics in the discourse of the later Coleridge. Criticism, affirms Eagleton, "has become a locus of political contention rather than a terrain of cultural consensus; and it is in this context that we can perhaps best evaluate the birth of the nineteenth-century 'sage'" (Eagleton 39). Eagleton goes on to argue that "the growth of idealist aesthetics in Europe, imported into England by Coleridge and Carlyle, is concomitant with this strategy" (Eagleton 39), a strategy of extricating literature from Realpolitik. However, this was not entirely true. On the contrary, Coleridge, in a journalistic spirit, engages with the subjects of his time. However, the idiom used gave his views a sage-like quality, something that was not to everyone's taste, William Hazlitt being a notable example in this sense: "All his notions

are floating and unfixed... his ideas seek to avoid all contact with solid substances” (Hazlitt 110). However, in order to do justice to Coleridge, a crossover between literature and politics remains an important aspect when one analyzes religious and political subjects.

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