

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Theologian for our Time

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## ABSTRACT

*Coleridge faced much the same issues as Christians do today – a new rampant atheism and a Christianity set on defending itself either by biblical “evidence” or by dogmatic pronouncement. Whilst embracing the scientific advances of the Enlightenment, he felt that in many ways philosophy and theology in England had lost their way during the eighteenth century, by concentrating solely on the mechanistic or on a God who acts as a ‘deus ex machina’, and whose role was increasingly diminished by scientific advance. He, like many of his contemporary defenders of the faith, wanted a liberal and rational theology, but one which recognized the priority of the subjective, of the immanent God found within the human imagination. It is only in this inner experience, and not in “proofs” or “evidences for Christianity, that we will find the reality of faith.*

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Theologian for our Time

The pessimist in us may suppose that in the modern world theology and the Church have been pushed into a corner. Richard Dawkins ‘et al’ may protest at the undue favour granted to faith in our society, but from the inside we can easily feel beleaguered, believing that theological thinking has been marginalised when it comes to the big issues. As a result theological thinking can appear to be either highly specialised and particular, or stridently and simplistically dogmatic. The Gifford Lectures given annually since 1888 ‘promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology’, accepting Kant’s challenge in his 1784 essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ to ‘dare to be wise’ and think for ourselves, implicitly accepting the bedrock faith of modern science that there are not and never have been any infallible scriptures or supernatural miracles. The Giffords are now supplemented by the Templeton Prize, awarded annually since 1973 to someone who ‘has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life’s spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works.’ There is much in nature and human life to love and admire but also much cruelty and indifference to suffering, so the existence of God can neither be proved or disproved. Seeking the divine within the creative process of the Big Bang may be a noble cause, and one eminently worth pursuing, but it is may be of little concern to most of us in our own struggle for faith.

Where to turn? Well, I suggest to an unlikely source, a romantic poet, an opium addict, an often abstruse metaphysical thinker: Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Surprisingly, many of the issues which consume us were his too, as he explored his own mental processes. The reality of God was to be found within us, he believed, and attempts to prove the validity of the Christian faith or the existence of God from historical or scientific or traditional philosophical proofs were doomed to fail.

All this begins for Coleridge in his poetic self. Coleridge’s best know poems all date from the early part of his life, and a common view of Coleridge is to see a young man

of brilliant promise transformed in his later years into a cantankerous, confused, philosophical obscurantist. Perhaps he should have died young like his near-contemporaries, Shelley and Keats.

Stopford Augustus Brooke in his *Theology in the English Poets* is typically dismissive of the later Coleridge. He sees his promise shattered by disillusionment after the initial idealism of the French Revolution soured, to be compounded by his failed marriage and his increasing opium addiction. For Brooke it is not just his poetry which declines, but also his theology, from its confident affirmation of God's presence in nature, where God is present in everything and at every moment – a Spinozian pantheism.

So Brooke writes:

'Coleridge sees that Wordsworth after the same shock remained calm and sure, and saw beyond the lost idea a nobler vision that his very loss had led him to; but it was not for him – nothing remained for him but prayer. The poetry-creating thought of a universal mankind, and of God as its king and guide, the theological idea of the poetry of Man had died in him; and with its death his true life as a poet ceased. It is a woeful thing to have a high conception and to fall short of it. It is still more woeful when we have linked it to God and love it, for with its loss our idea of God is lowered from what might have been. There is no lesson so solemn in the whole range of modern poetry as that given by Coleridge's poetry – genius without will – religion without strength – hope without perseverance – art without the power of finish.' *Stopford Brooke: Theology of the English Poets*, Kings London 1874 p.77

Brooke sees Coleridge's theological fall in his move away from God's immediate presence:

'Glory to thee, Father of earth and heaven,  
All-conscious Presence of the Universe,  
Nature's vast ever-acting energy,  
In Will, in deed, impulse of All in All.'

(*Coleridge: Destiny of Nations: Poems p. 108*)

From there he moves to seeing that the presence of God in Nature can only come from our thought. It is the God within us that gives meaning to the world round us. So Coleridge loses the objective view of the world and also becomes fixated on the self. For Brooke these are two fatal steps – the loss of objectivity and the self-absorption, both of which by contrast he sees Wordsworth resisting, which makes him for Brooke the far greater poet.

Brooke suggests that 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is the last evidence of his true theology, and evidences this not in the great theme of fall and redemption, but in the famous lines of the 'happy ending': 'He prayeth well, who loveth well. Both man and bird and beast.' Seeing these not as ironic, but as evidence that the poet, who had adventured so far into wild seas of mental and religious thought, had come home at last and found peace in simple faith in God, in childlike humility, in mercy and love of man, and in reverence for all things, almost as though nothing had happened, just as with the end of the Book of Job. They all lived happily ever after.

Now there was certainly that in Coleridge, which is in most of us, a desire for comfort, cosiness, shelter from the stormy blast, but it is surely a mistake to take this as his final religious position, just as it would be to take the ending of Job as a theological fulfilment of Job's wrestling with God.

I think we should see Coleridge's mature theological questioning arising first from the experience of poetical inspiration. Two grains of opium and 'Kubla Khan'. Does it all come from the memory, stored impressions – what he calls Fancy – or does it also sometimes arise from the ground of our being in symbolic form? This might either be in an immediate apprehension (Primary Imagination) or in the working through of this – the Secondary Imagination. In other words, is there really a 'Muse' we might call 'God' from whom we can draw by direct intuition? This we might compare to Jung's archetypes. This leads him to an older understanding, broadly Platonic, where behind the reality is the Idea, where God is beneath as the ground of being.

So, on the creation of 'Kubla Khan, he later wrote, 'The author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than two or three hundred lines ... On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote out the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas! Without the after restoration of the latter.' (*Richard Holmes: Coleridge: Darker Reflections p.435*)

The second source was the more negative one of his own personal crisis. 1813 was his *annus horribilis* – by then he was dependent on opium, his marriage was finished in all but name, his infatuation with Sara Hutchinson (Wordsworth's sister-in-law) was going nowhere, and his son Hartley had lost his fellowship at Oriel, and he even managed to fall out with Wordsworth himself. He felt a complete failure, and the optimistic radicalism of Unitarianism no longer served.

The failure was translated into a profound sense of sin – the fallenness of humanity loomed large from then on – and into an antipathy to those who represented his former theological self. His particular *bête noir* became William Paley. In *Aids to Reflection*, the mature Coleridge's attempts to reflect on his faith, Paley is again and again traduced as the embodiment of all that is wrong with Christian theology. Paley's theology made people look out, for evidences of God in Scripture or in Nature, rather than looking inward into their own souls. For Paley famously, God was the final watchmaker, the supreme designer.

Here "Paley" is shorthand for the whole tendency of mainstream religious thought in England from John Locke onwards, in which a reasonable faith was championed, which distrusted metaphysics, which tended to see the Greek influence as the beginning of all that went wrong with the church. Truth for Locke and his successors came from sense experience. Hence, the importance of the evidences of miracle, fulfilment of prophecy and the argument from design for Christian apologetic. Coleridge came to see this as selling out to the spirit of the age. He writes: 'I fear that the mode of defending

Christianity ... adopted by Dr. Paley, has increased the number of infidels: never could it have been so great, if thinking men had been habitually led to look into their own souls, instead of always looking out, both of themselves, and of their nature.' (CL11 1189: quoted Douglas Hedley: *Philosophy and Religion* p.194)

This might seem like a capitulation to science, but what Coleridge realized was that theology and science could not compete on the same territory. Scientific understanding would increasingly necessitate a truncated form of faith if theologians persisted in using biblical or natural evidence for religious assertions. We see this in a scientist-cum-theologian whom the younger Coleridge greatly admired, Joseph Priestley. Priestley was a theological modernist who believed that primitive Christianity needed to be stripped of all its accretions, or corruptions as he saw them. So for instance, as he saw it, the doctrine of the Trinity was certainly not part of the earliest Christianity, and the idea of an immaterial soul was all down to corrupting Greek influences. Doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Atonement were all part of these metaphysical accretions which obscured the pure ethical teaching of Jesus and the biblical evidences for belief. The Church Fathers for him were characterised by an overweening pride in their own learning and a profound contempt for the vulgar. Priestley asserted a faith, substantiated by evidences, akin to scientific proofs, which was open to all.

As I say, Coleridge was an admirer of Priestley, especially as the latter was also a political progressive, an advocate of the principles of the French Revolution. In 1791 his house in Cambridge was ransacked by an anti-French mob, and he emigrated to America. He represented all the younger Coleridge admired and that admiration didn't cease, except that for the post-1813 *annus horribilis* Coleridge, the least in the kingdom of God was greater than he – Priestley was a great and honourable man, but no Christian.

The Christianity which Coleridge discovered, or rediscovered, was more that of the 17<sup>th</sup> than the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the theology of the Cambridge Platonists, but the flesh was put on the bones, not in England but in Germany, which he visited for ten months in 1798. Here he encountered the beginnings of biblical textual criticism, and also the ideas of Kant, of Schelling and of German Idealism. Schelling in particular was to influence him to the extent that Coleridge had to suffer being accused of plagiarising him in some of his lectures. Douglas Hedley describes Schelling's philosophy as 'an objective idealism of absolute subjectivity'. (*Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion*) By this I think he means that idealism is something over against us – reason is not just a function of our minds, but is something with its own reality. But at the same time, it is subjective, in that it is found within us. God is the final 'I am' beneath my own 'I am'. And of course this tied up with his poetic sensibility and the source of inspiration. It had to come from within. The poetic ideas welled up within him but yet from a source beyond him.

*'I may not hope from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.'*

(Coleridge: *'Dejection Collected Poems* p.308)

Here he crucially distinguished between a symbol and a sign. He defines a symbol as that which is characterised by 'a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in

that unity of which it is representative.' (S T Coleridge: *Lay Sermons*: p.33) On the other hand, a sign, or an allegory for that matter, does not have that necessary connection. It is simply a way of trying to represent something other.

To try to make sense of this I went to Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* where I think he has something of the same thing in mind when speaking of drama. So he writes of Beckett's plays: 'A true symbol is specific, it is the only form a certain truth can take. The two men waiting by a stunted tree, the man recording himself on tape, the two men marooned in a tower, the woman buried to her waist in sand, the parents in the dustbins, the three heads in the urns: these are pure inventions, fresh images defined – and they stand on the stage as objects. They are theatre machines. People smile at them, but they hold their ground: they are critic-proof. We get nowhere if we expect to be told what they mean, yet each one has a relation with us we can't deny. If we accept this, the symbol opens in us a great and wondering O.' (Peter Brook *The Empty Space* p.64)

And later Brook writes: 'I know of one acid test of the theatre. When a performance is over, what remains? It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are highly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say. When years later I think of a striking theatrical experience I find a kernel engraved on my memory: a sergeant dancing, two tramps under a tree, an old woman dragging a cart, three people on a sofa in hell – or occasionally a trace deeper than any imagery. I haven't a hope of remembering the meanings precisely, but from the kernel I can construct a set of meanings. Then a purpose will have been served. A few hours could amend my thinking for life.' (*Op cit* 152)

I quote this because it makes sense to me. But the same could be said of any work of art, including of course, a poem of Coleridge. So 'Kubla Khan'; so 'The Ancient Mariner'. They have been dismissed as Jabberwocky-like drug-induced nonsense, but at the same time they can be utterly memorable, evoking something deep within us. So for instance from *The Ancient Mariner*:

*Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
I watched the water-snakes:  
They moved in tracks of shining white,  
And when they reared, the elfish light  
Fell off in hoary flakes.*

*Within the shadow of the ship  
I watched their rich attire:  
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,  
They coiled and swam, and every track  
Was a flash of golden fire.*

*O happy living things! No tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,  
And blessed them unaware.*

*The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea. (Coleridge: Collected Poems p.155)*

Of course, this has obvious psychological explanations (snakes etc.), but it also opens up the Other from a personal transformation that comes from seeing more clearly. It is symbolic.

Or again, from 'Kubla Khan':

*A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid.  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build the dome in air,  
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!  
And all should cry, Beware, Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes in holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Coleridge Collected Poems p.251)*

*In*

But the particular passage I started with about 'the translucence of the eternal in and through the temporal' etc. came from Coleridge's first 'Lay Sermon', where in fact he is speaking of the Bible. So in the Bible, there is the particular reference in any passage, but also that which can reveal the deepest mystery of God. He was accused of treating the Bible as any other book, and in one way of course he did, as this experience was not confined to biblical readings, but on the other hand he protests a very high claim for the Bible in that it is more likely to be the means of such an intuition of truth. 'O what a mine of undiscovered treasures, what a new world of power and truth would the Bible promise to our future meditation, if in some gracious moment one solitary text of all its inspired contents should but dawn upon us in the pure untroubled brightness of an idea, that most glorious birth of the God-like within us, which even as the light, its material symbol, reflects itself from a thousand surfaces, and flies homeward to its Parent Mind enriched with a thousand forms, itself above form and still remaining in its own simplicity and identity!' – Coleridge, ever the poet, even in an intellectual sermon! What he is saying is much what Blake said about 'seeing the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower', or the same sentiment expressed by Coleridge, 'Beholding the cope of heaven imaged in a dew-drop.' (S T Coleridge: Lay Sermons 56)

In other words, there is no direct access to God whether it may be in nature, or in art, or in the pages of Scripture. To treat the scriptures in this way, as the verbatim word of God, is to attempt the impossible. There can be no bypassing of the symbols. God can only reach us through the symbolic. So we have to do as it were a double-take. We see

symbol as it is, the sunset, the scene in the painting or the subject matter of the poem, the parable, miracle, biblical event, but at the same time we sense with imagination, within it something infinite, and something which is life-giving. Through the Symbol, the Imagination can see beyond ordinary reality. So Paul Tillich wrote: 'All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way.' And goes on to say that this is not only true of transcendent dimensions of reality, but also those within us. So 'a great play gives us not only a new vision of the human scene, but it opens up hidden depths of our own being.' (Paul Tillich: *Dynamics of Faith* p.42)

To worship the symbol without seeing that it is symbolic is the way of superstition and idolatry: 'Becoming more and more estranged from the one in all, goes wandering at length with its pack of amulets, bead-rolls, periapts, fetishes, and the like pedlary, on pilgrimages to Loreto, Mecca, or the temple of Juggernaut, arm in arm with sensuality on one side and self-torture on the other, followed by a motley group of friars, pardoners, faquirs, gamesters, flagellants, mountebanks, and harlots.' (S T Coleridge: *Lay Sermons* p.68) This is not just a wonderful piece of Protestant rhetoric, but comes from his whole antipathy to the literal, the superficial, the easy form of religion, which avoids the struggle of using the imagination to see the Reason behind, the God who is the ground of everything. He sees the same superficial literalism in both the attacks on Christianity – the new atheism of its time – and in its apologists such as Paley, and he would say the same of any form of fundamentalism of our own time.

However, all this may seem a long way from the actual needs of Christian apologetics today or even from our own personal faith. But having given my last paper here on Darwin, and finding the Darwinian case convincing, I have found reading Coleridge a tremendous reaffirmation of faith, not least because he had to struggle with it, not least because he too was facing the convincing arguments of science, and saw the increasingly unconvincing attempts of the well-intentioned to make a space for God in the common discourse, but in which the gaps kept getting smaller. In one way Coleridge made the final retreat, into the mind. But at the same time by doing so he showed how God could again be encountered and how this encounter could then irradiate the whole of experience. The case for religion is not made through trying to formulate a rationalised form of faith, a modernised religion. We cannot finally argue our corner against the secular world successfully. Christian physicists who try to take this argument back to the Big Bang itself with the anthropic principle, may be scientifically correct but end up with a cold and personally undemanding and unsatisfying faith. In religion there is no abstraction. 'In all things and in each thing – for the Almighty doth not create generalities or abide in abstractions – in each, the meanest, object it bears witness to a mystery of infinite solution.' (S.T Coleridge: *Lay Sermons* p.96) The particular must lead to the general. Love must begin with love of particular persons.

The paradoxical thing, he found, was that as he went within, to the realm of self-consciousness, he did not become more isolated, in a solipsist world, but was in fact drawn into an underlying unity. The later Coleridge becomes more and more mystical in his understanding. Our self-consciousness transcends the subject-object relation, and we find that we can only be ourselves in relationship. This is what all evolution is striving for, the unity that comes through and beyond the individual self-consciousness. The more we become what we are meant to be – and here he talks about each of us having a real self – the more we are in touch with the ground of being and with each

other and with the whole creation. In humankind, the whole of creation becomes self-aware.

The book he wrote which shows this best is his *Aids to Reflection*, written in his latter years. *Aids to Reflection* is written to counter the new atheism of his day, as a book of instruction to help 'all... who have dedicated their future lives to the cultivation of their race, as Pastors, Preachers, Missionaries, or Instructors of Youth' (S T Coleridge) *Aids to Reflection*; London 1825 p.xvi). It became a best-seller and for years was a spiritual resource for people as diverse as F D Maurice, Newman, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Arnold. The first part of *Aids* takes the form of a series of aphorisms mainly from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Christian Platonist, Archbishop Leighton, added to and commented on by Coleridge. An aphorism is a memorable maxim, almost a short sermon. Each aphorism stands on its own as distinct. In other words it's not part of a consecutive argument. A good aphorism is an essay or sermon in miniature, and the beauty of it is that it leaves us to think out the essay or sermon for ourselves. It fits with Coleridge's whole approach to truth, that you cannot be argued into it, but that it depends on insight, intuition and revelation. Aphorisms express the universal in a fragment. So the idea was that you chewed over the aphorism through the day.

For example: 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.' (ibid p.66)

'Your blessedness is not, - no believe it, it is not where most of you seek it, in things below you. How can that be? It must be a higher good to make you happy.' (ibid p.68)

'The Jews would not willingly tread upon the smallest piece of paper in their way, but took it up; for possibly, said they, the name of God may be on it. Though there was a little superstition in this, yet truly there is nothing but good religion in it, if we apply it to men. Trample not on any; there may be some work of grace there that thou knowest not of. The name of God may be written upon that soul thou treadest on; it may be a soul that Christ thought so much of, as to give His precious blood for it; therefore despise it not.' (ibid p.75)

So Coleridge's theology, his faith, comes from a long interior pilgrimage. He ends up where he began as a child, as a fully paid-up member of the Church of England, embracing Trinitarian faith. But it was his own faith. He had found it for himself, and in doing so had rejected, and sometimes with a great deal of vehemence, what he regarded as the false prophets who had made the running for so long.

He had no time for religion as a search for personal salvation – an essentially selfish quest, nor therefore for a self-centred piety, nor for an emphasis on credal belief which didn't touch the foundation of true religion, which must lie in every individual's heart, in the discovery of being in touch with reality, of being loved and accepted.

True religion was not a retreat to something infantile or to infallible dogma, but was, in a way, a continuation of the scientific quest, but within one's own subjectivity. He defines that *within* as the Logos, a term which combined both the realm of ideas transcending the finite mind, and the same ideas as immanent in human thought. Here one is in the world of intuition. Thought is not merely a 'little agitation of the brain', (David Hume: *Principal Writings* p.50) but the structural principle of the universe. 'There is a mind before the world, and senior to all things.' (Cudworth: *True Intellectual*

*System*, vol.iii. p.65)) For us the vital thing is to let go of attachments to a false reality, and to come first to a new understanding of our inner relationship to God as Logos, the God within our minds. This is the right approach for all, including the scientist: 'In order to arrive at truth the scientist must first go within himself and discover there the energy which informs the material universe.' (Douglas Hedley *op cit* p.213) In fact, only because the mind is separate from physical objects, and in a sense prior to them, can there be such a thing as science, because only from a separate vantage point can we contemplate the physical world. If all is of nature, then there is no freedom, and no means of establishing values. This is just as pertinent today as it was in Coleridge's time. If properly understood science is an ally of faith.

I finish with his parable from the end of his first 'Lay Sermon' which I think illustrates this. 'I found myself in a vast plain, which I immediately knew to be the Valley of Life. At the entrance of the valley stood a large and gloomy pile, into which I seemed constrained to enter.... I heard a deep buzz of discontent. A few whose eyes were bright, and either piercing or steady, and whose ample foreheads, with the weighty bar, ridge-like, above their eyebrows, bespoke observation followed by meditative thought; and a much larger number who were enraged by the insolence of the priests in exacting their offerings, had collected in one tumultuous group, and with a confused outcry of "This is the temple of Superstition!"

'We speeded from the temple, when we were addressed by a woman, tall beyond the stature of mortals, and with something more than human in her countenance and mien, which yet by mortals could only be felt, not conveyed by words, or intelligibly distinguished. Deep reflection, animated by ardent feelings, was displayed in them: and hope, without its uncertainty, and something more than all these, which I understood not; but which yet seemed to blend all these into a divine unity of expression.... We enquired her name. My name, she replied, is Religion.

'She led us to an eminence in the midst of the valley, from the top of which we could command the whole plain, and observe the relation of the different parts, of each to the other, and each to the whole, and of all to each. She then gave us an optic glass which assisted without contradicting our natural vision, and enabled us to see beyond the limits of the Valley of Life: though our eye even thus assisted permitted us only to behold a light and a glory, but what we could not descry, save only that it was, and that it was most glorious.

'I had overtaken and rejoined the more numerous party, who had abruptly left us, indignant at the very name of religion.

'... In the furthest distance of the chamber sate an old dim-eyed man, poring with a microscope over the torso of a statue, which had neither base, nor feet, nor head; but on its breast was carved, Nature. To this he continually applied his glass, and seemed enraptured with the various inequalities which it rendered visible on the seemingly polished surface of the marble. Yet evermore was this delight and triumph followed by expressions of hatred, and vehement railing against a being, who yet, he assured us, had no existence.

'... He talked much and vehemently concerning an infinite series of causes and effects, which he explained to me – a string of blind men, the last of whom caught hold of the skirt of the next before him, he of the next, and so on until they were all out of sight;

and that they all walked infallibly straight, without making one false step, though all were alike blind. Methought I borrowed courage from surprise, and asked him, "Who then is at the head to guide them?" He looked at me with ineffable contempt, not unmixed with an angry suspicion, and then replied, "No one: the string of blind men goes on for ever without any beginning: for although one blind man cannot move without stumbling, yet infinite blindness supplies the want of sight." I burst into laughter, which instantly turned to terror; - for as he started forward in rage, I caught a glance from behind; and lo! I beheld a monster bi-form and Janus-headed, in the hinder face and shape of which I instantly recognised the dread countenance of Superstition - and in the terror I awoke.' (S T Coleridge: *Lay Sermons* p.141)

Now I know parables should not need commentary; they speak for themselves. But it struck me that here we have a consummate summary of Coleridge's own faith, and also a wonderfully modern address to the new superstition and the new atheism. In other words, Coleridge is here identifying himself with those who have unmasked a great deal of what has gone on and does go on in the name of religion (the opium of the people), but also unmasks the vehement atheist, who in a way protests too much, who is so intent on the microscope, that he has altogether missed the bigger picture of the relationship of everything to everything else, and to the mystery and glory transcending it.

Coleridge defined poetry as an act of supreme attention - I think he felt the same about theology (about knowing God). It must come from supreme attention. 'A great poet ... must have the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent desert, the eye of a North American tracing the footsteps of an enemy upon the leaves that strew the forest, the touch of a blind man feeling the face of a darling child.' (Coleridge: Letter to Sotheby, quoted Basil Willey: *Coleridge*, London 1972 p.93). Try repeating that, replacing 'poet' with 'theologian'.

For Coleridge the evidence for the existence of a reason beyond our understanding was first in the fact that we can actually experience ourselves thinking; secondly, we are subject to moments when through intuition we are inspired or grasped by an idea; and thirdly, we dream. These are not the product simply of the memory or of natural causes. There is thus a within-ness which corresponds to the withoutness of science, and both are vital. So often however the former is denied.