1-1983

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Publication Info

Published in *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 76, Issue 1, 1983, pages 91-108.

Cutsinger, J.S. (1983). Coleridgean Polarity and Theological Vision. *Harvard Theological Review*, 76(1), 91-108.

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COLERIDGEAN POLARITY AND THEOLOGICAL VISION

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This essay concerns two closely related subjects: the religious philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the need for a new vision in Christian theology today. Though it is the second, more ambitious and adventurous topic that deserves the more sensitive treatment, it is rather to Coleridge himself that I have given the greater part of my attention. The reasoning behind this procedure is based upon a fairly simple fact: Coleridge's religious thought is still largely unknown to most people in the philosophical and theological communities. During the past twenty years or so, as many of Coleridge's hitherto unpublished notebooks and other manuscripts have been brought to light, a number of scholars of English literature have begun to study his thought, including his theology, with greater care.¹ But it is still rare to find a researcher outside literature per se who knows much of Coleridgean philosophy, beyond (perhaps) a few phrases from his theory of the imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*.² I have thought it

¹J Robert Barth, S J, and Thomas McFarland may be mentioned especially in this connection. See, respectively, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1969) and *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

²The best known of Coleridge's observations on the imagination can be found in the thirteenth chapter of the *Biographia*

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate, or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (*Biographia Literaria*, J Shawcross, ed. [Oxford: Oxford University, 1907] 1: 202)

One finds this passage quoted frequently in recent works dealing with the theological ima-

advisable, accordingly, to devote the larger portion of this paper to describing some of the salient features of Coleridge's thought, and to do so in the special light provided by one of his most powerful ideas, the idea of polarity. Nevertheless, I would also hope to call attention throughout to the second, constructive topic, to the need for a new vision in theology. Though I shall be only briefly sketching this vision in a direct way toward the end of the essay, I would ask the reader to recognize, even from the beginning, that Coleridge is attempting to awaken nothing other than a possible way of seeing God.

I

The student of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) knows well with what incredible persistence this philosopher and poet emphasized, as the guiding theme and chief object of his thought, the transformation of one's vision. Coleridge, by his own admission, had seen the world anew, and he wished for his interlocutors and readers to share that vision through the development of their own powers of reflection. He aimed always, therefore, whether in verse or prose, "so to represent familiar objects as to awaken the minds of others to a like freshness of sensation concerning them."³ "You are going," Coleridge warned his reader,

not indeed in search of the New World, like Columbus and his adventurers, nor yet an *other* world, that is to come, but in search of the other world that *now* is, and ever has been though undreamt of by the Many, and by the greater part even of the Few⁴

But the student of Coleridge remembers, too, the unparalleled importance that he attached throughout his thinking to the question of unity. Like many another romantic of his day, Coleridge was concerned to pierce through custom and habit, what he called "the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude,"⁵ in order to see a unity and wholeness of things more inward than surfaces and deeper, hence, than the mutual exclusions of materialism and mechanism and of material and

gination. As but one among numerous examples, see Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 200. As I hope to show, the imagination is only the tip of a Coleridgean iceberg.

³*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (general editor): Vol. 4, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara Rooke (Princeton: Princeton University, 1969); quotation from 1:110.

⁴*Coleridge on Logic and Learning: With Selections from the Unpublished Manuscripts*, ed. Alice D. Snyder (New Haven: Yale University, 1929) 1.

⁵*Biographia Literaria*, 2:6.

mechanical things: a unity that would preserve also, however, the fullness and abundance of the nature he loved. We may consider his theory of the imagination, with its "esemplastic" or unity-making power, or his thought about life and organicism, or his propaedeutic "distinction in kind" between the reason and the understanding.⁶ But in all cases, we find that Coleridge's method is a method attempting always to disclose a unity, though not identity, among the seeming irreducibles of a dividing vision: a unity of the one and the many, sameness and difference, subject and object, self and other, activity and passivity.

Now each of these important facets of Coleridge's thought—the transformation of vision and the search for unity—has been discussed many times by scholars of his work. Each is especially well known to the interpreter of the romantic imagination. And yet, studies of Coleridge have not reflected a full awareness of the essential, vital relationship between these two facets. There has not been a decisive recognition that unity marks the way, the method or exercise, by which Coleridge would have us approach his vision and discover "the other world that *now* is." It has not been fully seen, in other words, that oneness gives form to his transformed vision. Indeed, the study of Coleridge's work lacks particularly a theological approach to this question. For the end to which transformation and unity are meant to lead his reader, as they led him, is nothing less than the knowledge of God. As John Muirhead observed, "There is a sense in which Coleridge's whole philosophy was a Philosophy of Religion. He was himself willing to speak of it as a Theosophy, even as a Theognosy—a knowledge of God, to which all other knowledges led up." J. Robert Barth, S.J., shares the same perception. For Coleridge, Barth writes, "all knowledge is ultimately one, whether it be scientific, poetic, philosophical, or religious, and the capstone of all knowledge for him is knowledge of God."⁷

Through the transformation of his vision, Coleridge had glimpsed a world translucent to deity. He had found, in short, that revisioning one's world could mean the very en-visioning of God. But such a transformation cannot be effected, Coleridge believed, apart from

⁶Coleridge speaks of the "esemplastic" power of the imagination in the *Biographia Literaria*, 1 107; for his theory of life, see the whole of his "Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life," *Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, ed Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Random House, 1951) 558–606, for examples of Coleridge's distinction between reason and understanding, see *The Friend*, 1. 514–20 and *Aids to Reflection*, ed Henry Nelson Coleridge (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1971) 211–25.

⁷John H. Muirhead, *Coleridge as Philosopher* (New York: Humanities, 1930) 217. J. Robert Barth, S.J., *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1977) 11.

exercising and strengthening our capacity to see true unity—nor, therefore, apart from our capacity to see “distinctly” rather than “dividedly,” “it being the business of philosophy,” as he said, “ever to distinguish without unnaturally dividing.”⁸ This ability to see distinctly—to see the inward, and not just superficial, relationship of things—becomes in fact the means or medium through which the knowledge of God is transmitted and the experiential basis, therefore, of Coleridgean theology. Indeed, to see the unity among “familiar” things was for him at once also to see the unity of those things and God. To awaken thus “the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” was to discover “the loveliness and wonders of the world before us,” a world diaphanous to God.⁹

One finds in reading Coleridge, however, that his sense of unity is most unusual, that it aims expressly to call into question our taken-for-granted view of relationships. Certainly, one of the simplest and most fatuous of platitudes is the call for unity, and Coleridge seems to have been well aware of that fact. “I am sure,” he confesses in one of his early memorandum-books, “that two very different meanings if not more lurk in the word, *one*.”¹⁰ And he believed that finding the truest and most adequate meaning could spell the difference between real transformation and just another custom-honoring cliché. A large part of the interpreter’s work must consist, therefore, in trying to follow Coleridge in his thinking about this first and most basic of ideas, in searching for a distinctively Coleridgean unity. One of the most rewarding of these searches may be conducted in pursuit of the unity-affirming concept that Coleridge calls “polarity.”

Perhaps the most important thing to realize first about Coleridge’s interest in polar unity is that it was an interest totally oblivious to the boundaries among disciplines and subjects. His descriptions and definitions of this idea were forever cutting across the most widely differentiated areas of concern, and his illustrations of polarity were drawn from every corner. The following, taken from one of his letters, is an excellent example of this fact. Coleridge’s correspondent, I am sure, must have felt, in reading the letter, that he was caught in a kaleidoscope. “The Alphabet of Physics no less than of Metaphysics, of Physiology no less than of Psychology is an Alphabet of *Relations*, in which N is N only because M is M and O, O. The reality of all alike”—the reader will notice here a first clue to the theological

⁸ *The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949) 268.

⁹ *Biographia Literaria*, 2 6

¹⁰ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (New York: Pantheon, 1961) vol. 2, entry 2332.

dimension of polar experience—"is the A and Ω , far rather than Ineffable which is neither Alpha separately, nor Omega separately, nor Alpha and Omega by *composition*." Composition, as we shall see, is among the species of false unity. No, the reality of all, he continues, is that alone which "can become an object of *Consciousness* or *Thought*, even as all the powers of the material world can become objects of *Perception*, only as two Poles or Counterpoints of the same Line."¹¹ To put the matter somewhat more simply, the reality of all, had we but eyes to see it, is polar.

The second thing one has to understand about Coleridge is the nature of his method. Coleridge's most basic and self-conscious allegiance was to Plato, and, through Plato, to the Socratic *maieusis* or midwifery, to the need for getting a person involved in the search for truth. Coleridge aimed in all his work, therefore (in words he used, in fact, to describe the method of Plato's education),

not to assist in storing the passive mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the human soul were a mere repository or banqueting-room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself, what it can appropriate, and re-produce in fruits of its own.¹²

In order to excite his readers' minds in this way, Coleridge's method involved providing certain occasions or "Landing-Places"¹³ in his writing where the reader would be called upon to exercise his own reflection and to become imaginatively involved in the circumstance or event or idea that Coleridge was describing. One such Landing-Place, found in the *Biographia Literaria*, has long been a favorite with me. I quote it in full because I think it can help prepare us to appreciate more thoroughly the definition of polarity that I shall then be turning to. The following quotation is meant to signify polarity-in-action, as it were, or "experienced" polarity, by recreating in us the feeling of balance. As before, we shall see that Coleridge is not one to respect topical limitations:

In every voluntary movement we first counteract gravitation, in order to avail ourselves of it. It must exist, that there may be a something to be counteracted, and which, by its re-action, may aid the force that is exerted to resist it. Let us consider what we do when we leap. We first resist the

¹¹ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959) 4. 688.

¹² *The Friend*, 1. 473

¹³ This descriptive phrase is taken from *The Friend*, where such "Landing-Places" were frequently employed.

gravitating power by an act purely voluntary, and then by another act, voluntary in part, we yield to it in order to light on the spot, which we had previously proposed to ourselves. Now let a man watch his mind while he is composing, or, to take a still more common case, while he is trying to recollect a name, and he will find the process completely analogous. 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, and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive.¹⁴

But let us turn now to the idea, rather than the experience, of polarity. Perhaps the most succinct of Coleridge's definitions of the idea is one deposited, with typical cunning, in a footnote to one of the numbers of his periodical *The Friend*:

EVERY POWER IN NATURE AND IN SPIRIT *must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation.* AND ALL OPPOSITION IS A TENDENCY TO RE-UNION. This is the universal Law of Polarity or essential Dualism.¹⁵

If this law is to be grasped, one must recognize, first of all, which of the two opposite meanings of polarity Coleridge intends. For polarity is to be numbered among that strange collection of words, including the English "cleave" and the German *aufheben* (which Hegel found so felicitous), whose meanings comprise two antonyms. At the one extreme, a polar relationship may mean a relationship between antagonists, a relationship robbed of unity altogether. This sense of the term is clearest, perhaps, in the verb "polarize." It is said, for example, that parties have been polarized in an international dispute. In this case, polarity tends to double for the words "conflict" and "enmity." When used in this fashion, the poles in question are seen predominantly as independent and "polemical" individuals. Polarity may therefore come to mean precisely the opposite of harmony, cooperation, and unity; what the poles have in common may be no more than the fact that they have nothing in common, that they tend only to draw away from one another. The vocabulary of existentialism, with its encounters and estrangements, would seem to have made this sense of the word the most common. This sense is involved, for instance, when Gordon

¹⁴*Biographia Literaria*, I 85–86

¹⁵*The Friend*, I 94n

Kaufman speaks of the epistemological polarity between subject and object. "Neither the subject nor the object pole can be reduced one to the other," Kaufman writes:

We encounter the object only in its opposition to, and limitation of, our strivings. Hence, in a very real sense, objective nature must always be strange or foreign to us, something which we can know only superficially, i.e., something of which we can know only the "surfaces," the external side which we encounter, but which we can never know from within¹⁶

Here polarity means that one thing cannot be fully united with another thing, that the fusion of *idem et alter*, the same with the different, the familiar and fresh, for purposes of revealing the true unity Coleridge desires, is not possible.

But, on the other hand, the word's original application to magnetism may be emphasized. One may then attend, not to the separation of antagonistic poles, but to the oneness of poles within a magnetic field, or (by extension) to the literal and metaphorical fact that "opposites attract." Coleridge repeatedly focuses our attention upon this meaning of the word, as when he writes:

Polarity is not a Composite Force, or *vis terna* constituted by the moments of two counter-agents. It is 1 manifested in 2, not $1 + 1 = 2$. . . The polar forces are the two forms, in which a one Power works in the same act and instant. Thus, it is not the *Power*, Attraction and the Power Repulsion at once tugging and tugging like two sturdy Wrestlers that compose the Magnet; but The Magnetic Power working at once positively and negatively. Attraction and Repulsion are the two Forces of the one magnetic Power.¹⁷

Here the poles are seen, not so much in light of opposition or discord, but as parts of one thing, of a unity, whether it is a magnet, an electric current, or a gravitational globe. Polarity in this case entails harmony and cooperation, with one pole supplying what the other lacks and vice versa. Such poles complement or complete one another and are required for each other's existence. This meaning is today more commonly employed, it seems, in scientific discussions, where positive and negative electrical charges are believed to support and stabilize each other, as in the structure of an atom.

Of course, this second meaning of polarity includes, more than it opposes, the first meaning. Although it centers our attention on unity and harmonious relationship, we are not allowed to forget that there is

¹⁶*Relativism, Knowledge, and Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960) 34

¹⁷Quoted by Owen Barfield in *What Coleridge Thought* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1971) 203 n. 24. I must acknowledge my great debt to Mr. Barfield for his incomparable assistance, both scholarly and personal, in all of my work on Coleridge

an opposition, though not a contradiction or exclusion, within that unity, that there is an *alter*, even though the *idem* is the *alter*. Polarity thus prevents the experience of oneness from collapsing into a blank and undifferentiated identity; it prevents the collapse, in Coleridge's terms, of unity into "unicity."¹⁸ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Coleridge employed polarity, in keeping with its second sense, as a way of expressing his own, distinctive understanding of oneness. For as we observed earlier, he believed above all that a true perception of unity must preserve the diversity and fullness of the things unified. The Coleridgean "one" exists, not at the expense of the many, but through the many and as their harmony. Polarity was, accordingly, a pivotal idea to Coleridge in describing his transformed vision. Only in a vision informed by polar relations could the same, the commonplace and familiar, really be transformed and become different, for only there was difference not excluded, even in fusion.

Two entries from Coleridge's early notebooks help to reinforce the second meaning of polarity, while illustrating well his characteristically romantic expression of wholeness. The first passage describes his vision of the sea while aboard a ship bound for Malta, the other the topography of a Coleridgean country walk.

O said I as I looked on the blue, yellow, green, & purple green Sea, with all its hollows & swells, & cut-glass surfaces—O what an Ocean of lovely forms!—and I was vexed, teased, that the sentence sounded like a play of Words. But it was not, the mind within me was struggling to express the marvellous distinctness & unconfounded personality of each of the million millions of forms, & yet the undivided Unity in which they subsisted.¹⁹

Still as I rise, I am more & more enamoured of the marvellous playfulness of the Surface of the Hills/such swellings, *startings*, sinkings, and yet all so combined as to make it impossible to look at as many/no! it was a manifold *One!*²⁰

If we are to appreciate fully the meaning of polarity, "the manifestation of one power by opposite forces,"²¹ it is most important that we pay special attention, in both of these quotations, to the conjunction "yet." For in each case, "yet" signals the fact that Coleridge has expressed a conjunction of the many running against the grain of what we would normally expect. I must pause to emphasize this point, lest

¹⁸"Unity or unition, and indistinguishable *unicity* or sameness," writes Coleridge, "are incompatible terms. We never speak of the unity of attraction, or the unity of repulsion, but of the unity of attraction and repulsion" (*Aids to Reflection*, 206–7nn.).

¹⁹*Notebooks*, vol. 2, entry 2344.

²⁰*Ibid.*, entry 2705.

²¹*The Friend*, 1. 479.

our common materialistic assumptions—and Coleridge believes we are all materialists and mechanists—make for misinterpretation. We must recognize first and foremost that the unity Coleridge believes he has seen on board ship and in the hills of the English countryside is a unity that can be seen and expressed only in spite of our customary, empirical perception of things: a perception in which a thing is what it is, not through another or because of another, but because it is *not* another thing, a perception ratified in the A or not-A of Aristotelian logic. Polarity is meant to highlight the “yet,” to highlight the true unity of the *tertium* that is normally thought to be *non datur*. Whatever else it might be, Coleridge’s unity must remain a mystery to a merely empirical perception. The “distinctness & unconfounded personality” that it preserves remain “marvellous” indeed. And thus, polarity not only prevents the collapse of unity into unicity; it also guards against our thinking of “one” in ways conformable to the ordinary, the material and atomic, the untransformed.

This second function is crucial, for everyone’s persistent temptation, Coleridge believes, is to assume that what is meant by unity is consistent always with a mechanical scheme of parts and wholes. Things having discrete surfaces, he insists, have come to dominate our thinking. We are “finger-philosophers . . . , snails in intellect who wear their eyes at the tips of their feelers, and cannot even see unless they at the same time *touch*.”²² A certain number of gears, a certain number of nuts and bolts, plus an assortment of pulleys, make for one complete machine; just so, we mistakenly assume, many waves make one sea, and many hills one landscape. As we shall presently see, such indiscreet applications of discreteness can be, and have been, extended even to the unity of God, man, and world. But such mechanical wholes are not the many that are *yet*, that are *nevertheless*, one. The oneness of Coleridge’s many is instead a oneness counter to collection and simple aggregation, and thus counter also to what we ordinarily mean by “many.” Manyness is predicated in our everyday, unreflective experience, Coleridge observes, upon the possibility of empirical visibility and, hence, upon the sense-perception of discontinuous positions and distances. But the Coleridgean “one,” though it embraces waves and hills, and God and man, is one in spite of such perceptions.

It is this polar oneness that occupies the central place when Coleridge distinguishes “vital” philosophy and true unity from the “mechanic” philosophy’s unity of juxtaposition. Here is provided as

²²“Magnanimity,” in *Omniana*, or *Horae otiosiores*, by Robert Southey and S. T. Coleridge (London, 1812) sect 129

good a synopsis of the untransformed and transformed visions as the interpreter may find. "The leading differences between mechanic and vital philosophy may all be drawn from one point," writes Coleridge.

The former, demanding for every mode and act of existence real or possible *visibility*, knows only of distance and nearness, composition (or rather juxtaposition) and decomposition, in short the relations of unproductive particles to each other, so that in every instance the result is the exact sum of the component quantities, as in arithmetical addition. This is the philosophy of death, and only of a dead nature can it hold good. In life [here is the source of transformation] much more in spirit, and in a living and spiritual philosophy, the two component counter-powers actually interpenetrate each other, and generate a higher third, including both the former, ita tamen ut sit alia et major [so that, nevertheless, it may be other and greater].²³

Where before we noted the importance of the conjunction "yet," here the Latin *tamen*, nevertheless, turns our sense of surface inside out. For no mind under (what Coleridge called) the "despotism" of the empirical eye²⁴ and a slave to mutual exclusions can think the meaning of a word like interpenetration—a word that demands of two united somethings that they be inside each other. No materialist, therefore, without being thrown back against the source of his assumptions, can begin to experience the reality of a oneness in which the elements *are* themselves, nevertheless *alia*, *not* themselves.

Coleridge's interpenetration, it should be noticed, is not the same as interlocking or intertwining or any number of similar conceptions in which the components are allowed to retain their original solidity and substantial integrity. Interpenetration, and thus polarity, aims instead to violate the deepest of all our assumptions: our habitual understanding of material things as based upon virtually every act, every movement that we perform as bodily beings. The sensation of taking up room in the world, the feeling of resistance to muscular exertion at the surface of our skin, in everything from walking to breathing, "weighs" heavily (it is even in our language) upon all our ways of knowing and conceiving. We have no need to be taught conceptually that most basic of Newtonian principles, that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time: the feeling is in our bones.

Coleridge is convinced, however, that the feeling may change, or, at least, that its unwarranted hegemony over our thoughts can be made to subside. And it is with such words as interpenetration, together with their various descriptions and exhibitions, that Coleridge aims,

²³ *The Collected Works*, ed. Coburn. Vol. 6, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Princeton University, 1972). "The Statesman's Manual," 89.

²⁴ *Biographia Literaria*, I. 74.

maieutically, to awaken a *novel* feeling and *fresh* experience and to teach the possibility of a relationship and a unity more intimate than that permitted by solids. For in order to interpenetrate, as polarity requires, and not just to interlock, each of two related things must give up its boundedness and sacrifice a part of its own integrity in another's behalf. The point or area of the "surface" of a given thing where it penetrates another thing and, in so doing, exercises its own outwardly directed power—the place at which it resists and pushes into the other's substance—is also the very point or area of its own "surface" where it is itself pierced and entered, where it gives way to another's outwardly directed power. Clearly, the meaning of "surface," as the quotation marks are meant to suggest, must itself be thoroughly transformed. And thus, the interpenetration of polar opposites, when it becomes a matter of direct experience, compels us to see our world of former solids very differently and, hence, to see a different world, a world, in fact, that is conformable to the being of him who prayed that *all* might be *one* "even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee."²⁵ The conformability between polar vision and the person of Christ is no accident. It was the Logos himself, himself in polar relation to the Father, whom Coleridge regarded as the principle of every polarity, every *idem et alter*, throughout creation. For "in this first substantial intelligible distinction (ὁ λόγος)," he writes, "all other distinctions that can subsist in the indivisible unity . . . are included."²⁶

II

It is here at last, in view of this special Christological application of polarity, that we can begin to see, perhaps, how the Coleridgean revisioning of unity may involve also a revisioning of theology. For it is here that we may first glimpse a possible solution to the chief problem facing today's theologian: the problem of the knowledge of God. To put the matter more precisely, and yet more boldly, I offer the following thesis: Only with a Coleridgean experience of interpenetration and polar unity can theology begin to renew its proper work, its talk of God, for only thus, I would argue, can it begin to speak its language on grounds that are equally beyond the reach of skepticism and faithful to Christian tradition.

The problem of knowledge, any knowledge, when phenomenologically considered, is a problem of barriers or dividing surfaces. To

²⁵John 17:21

²⁶Quoted from Coleridge's fragmentary manuscript *Opus Maximum* by James D. Boulger in *Coleridge as Religious Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University, 1961) 139

question or doubt the truth of what seems to be known is to suspect that we are, in some sense, cut off and alienated from a world "out there." Reality is sensed to be removed from seeming by a concealing curtain or wall. The labels we use in describing this dividing surface are unimportant. We can speak of the epistemological barrier between the subject and the object of knowledge—as Gordon Kaufman did above—or, more existentially perhaps, of a dividing partition between the self and the other. And we can assemble these and their related cognitive and moral dilemmas together under the customary umbrellas of "Cartesian dualism" and "existential estrangement."

It is important, of course, that we be reminded of the theological consequences of such barriers. The oppressive feeling that our world is divided into parts seems to have generated an equally oppressive set of dividing surfaces between that world itself and God. Skepticism has made it appear, on the horizontal, as it were, that ours is a world of us and them: that there is, on the one hand, a region continuous with the self or subject, flowing under the direction of its own power and activity; and, on the other hand, a second region, discontinuous with the self or subject, possessing unknown and unknowable motions and configurations of its own. This sense of division has, in turn, come to express itself theologically in a number of all-too-familiar vertical dichotomies. The problem of knowledge has here made itself felt as a limiting surface between the immanent and the transcendent, reason and revelation, the secular and the sacred, the scientific and the religious, and the natural and the supernatural. Just such an experience of impenetrability allows David Tracy, for example, to echo the thoughts of most of his theological contemporaries. "The modern theologian," Tracy writes,

is not merely a theologian intellectually troubled by certain traditional Christian cognitive beliefs, nor even is he just ethically disturbed by the imperatives to obedience or the presumptions for belief which traditional theological practice manifested. Rather, that theologian finds that his basic faith, his fundamental attitude towards reality, is the same faith shared implicitly or explicitly by his secular contemporaries. No more than they, can he allow belief in a "supernatural" realm of ultimate significance or in a supernatural God who seems, in the end, indifferent to the ultimate significance of our actions. Such beliefs do not represent his faith, his basic understanding of existence, his fundamental commitments.

These fundamental commitments, Tracy explains, are no longer to the supernatural God of Christian tradition, but to "the ultimate significance and final worth of our lives, our thoughts, and actions, here and now, in nature and in history"—our lives, that is, on the "bottom"

side of the great divide.²⁷

In general—and keeping in mind the exaggerated simplicity of all generalizations—it would seem that there have been two basic solutions to the problem of skepticism in modern theology. In their efforts to maintain the validity of language about God, theologians have tended to proceed chiefly in two distinct directions and to locate that which is meant by “God” in two different places. The first group has in general proceeded along a path from humanity to divinity and has used its language about God to refer to something that is characteristically subjective. God has been located primarily in the first of the two regions just mentioned, the one on the near side of the cognitive divide: a region, as I said, continuous with the human self or subject. A second group, on the other hand, has tended to move in its thinking from divinity to humanity and has spoken of God as something exclusively objective. God has been located by this group on the far side of the cognitive divide: a region discontinuous with the self or subject and possessing (by human aid alone) unknown and unknowable configurations of its own.

My talk of two groups, of course, is meant to suggest what may be broadly described as, on the one hand, the program of protestant liberalism and Roman Catholic modernism and, on the other hand, the program of neo-orthodoxy. One may recall what Peter Berger has called, respectively the “reductive” and “deductive” methods.²⁸ But here, too, the labels we use are not especially important. Each reader will think of different theologians and different theologies that illustrate best the two, diverse theological programs that I have in mind. What is crucial is that we be aware of the way in which both methods, far from overcoming the problem of doubt, have in fact helped to accentuate the problem by maintaining the initial barriers and strengthening the experience of surface and separation. For insofar as they have distinguished themselves from one another primarily by the location of their Gods—the one within, the other outside, the compartment framed by subjectivity—both groups have continued to honor the very framework of thinking that produced modern skepticism in the first place, and both have done so, I believe, because they have failed to appropriate the experiential possibility of Coleridge’s polar unity. The Eastern Orthodox thinker S. L. Frank puts the problem this way:

²⁷David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 8.

²⁸*The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979) chaps. 3 and 4.

The dilemma [of skepticism] . . . is a misunderstanding due to the naive materialistic idea that our "soul" or self is a kind of sealed vessel with an opening that connects it with the external world, while within it is entirely self-contained and clothed, as it were, in an impenetrable sheath. Starting with this assumption, people either seek for God among the contents of the external world or declare him to be an "illusion," i.e. merely a mental state, an element or product of our own inner life. But the soul is not a sealed vessel: there is a fathomless depth in it, and in that depth it is open to God and in contact with him. . . . Faith is the experience of the most intimate possession which is of the nature of merging and mutual penetration.²⁹

Though the liberal method has never wished to say that God is "merely a mental state," and though neo-orthodoxy has never been so naive as to search for God among "the contents of the external world," I do think we can see in these two programs the tendency Frank describes, a tendency emerging from these methods' common sense of separateness and division, and from their incapacity for "mutual penetration."

Theology in any age requires at least two things: knowledge and divinity. If there is no knowledge of God—if, that is, man is without any cognitive assurance that "God" refers to something real—then theology collapses; it is without its necessary *logos*. There must be, in other words, some medium or connection or continuity between its object and its source in the human mind if theology is to be anything more than babbling. On the other hand, theology remains, if not an empty word, then surely an idolatrous enterprise, if what it knows is not truly divine. Though there be ever so much continuity, and though man be assured of the reality of the object of his talk, his talk is not theology unless this Being possesses that uncontrollable Something—that greater value, power, existence: in short, that *discontinuity* with man and his world—normally signified by "God." Without this, theology is without its equally necessary *theos*.

Continuity and discontinuity are alike indispensable if language about God is to be *language* about *God*. Yet it is precisely the full, perceptual unity of both these needed elements that seems today so often lacking. We seem quite able, some of us, to think of God as a something within; and we seem quite able, too, some of us, to think of God as a something without. I dare say, in fact, that many of us fancy ourselves able, and perhaps *are* able, to think theologically in both respects. But what seems too often absent in theological thought is a language based upon the experiential fact of a God whose being transcends the categories of in and out themselves, a God who is perceived to be beyond even the most sophisticated conflation of all the

²⁹*God with Us: Three Meditations* (New Haven: Yale University, 1946) 47

conceptions of in and out. The necessary notions and vocabularies are not lacking to current discourse, after all. It is in fact quite easy to say, and many are saying, that true divinity must be both immanent and transcendent, or relative and absolute. But it is even easier, I suspect, in proportion as our substantives become more erudite, to mistake the lowly conjunction "both" for the "mechanic," and hence Nestorian, "both" of salt and pepper. Some readers may be thinking that a fresh consideration of Hegel, or that process-thought, at least, with its explicit talk of dipolarity, can make the necessary contributions to the unity Coleridge is searching for, and perhaps they can. Coleridge makes it clear, however, that whatever conceptual method we choose, if it is to be theologically successful, must begin its work at the perceptual level first, by challenging, not so much our traditional systems and ideologies, as our common sense—our nearly universal experience of palpable separateness and division—and that it must do so in behalf of the God who "interpenetrates" the "other world that *now* is."³⁰

There is an obvious sense, of course, in which the point I am making is nothing new. Christian theologians of all persuasions seem to have recognized in all ages that God is an odd sort of being, indeed—a being distinctively perplexing in his unwillingness to be subdivided. It matters not where we turn. We may consider the trinitarian and Christological controversies of the patristic age or the scholastic problem of faith and reason or the question of free will and determinism posed by the Reformation. In all cases, however, the task of the theologian seems always to have been that of rendering intelligible man's relationship to a God who is forever overflowing custom's bounds. Thus the theologian has been likewise forever called to distinguish without dividing, to lay a claim to the human and a claim to the divine, but not to do so "superficially"—to do so, rather, in such a way as to allow for a *communicatio idiomatum*, for the immanence *yet* transcendence, the sameness *yet* otherness, the "in" of the "out," and the "out" of the "in" of this strange one called God. It should be stressed, perhaps, that this "call" applies only to the Christian theologian and not (necessarily, at least) to the philosopher of religion—moreover, only to the theologian who intends to remain faithful to tradition. What degree of such faithfulness is acceptable today is an encyclopedic topic in itself,

³⁰Though they are similar in several respects, Coleridgean polarity and the dipolar theism of contemporary process-theologies should therefore be distinguished. Where the latter seems concerned predominantly with conceptual transformation, with the criticism of classical theism, the former's chief object is perceptual change and the criticism of empirical cognition. Coleridge's main interest is not in substituting one idea (even the idea of polarity) for another idea, but in widening the range of human perception itself, in transforming *vision* and in finding a freshness of *sensation*.

the consideration of which would carry us far beyond the scope of the present subject. It will suffice here, I hope, if I make but two observations: first, that *some* faithfulness is clearly required, lest our reinterpretations and correlations become mere substitutions; and, second, that even the *least* degree of faithfulness to tradition must surely involve the theologian's recognizing at some point the decisiveness of Christ's "two natures." It is in light of these two beliefs, and these two natures, that I have hinted several times at the centrality of Christology, and it is in this light, too, that polarity and Christology seem to have embraced in Coleridge's mind.

Theology today, however much we may blame it for poor management of its subject, has, in a way, been no different from traditional thought. Despite its problems, problems extending, as we know, even to the reality of God, this theology has retained its recognition of the need for balance. Yet it seems to have done so in much the same fashion as we would expect of a committee, by delegating different responsibilities to different individuals and schools of thought to be performed at different times and places. And so, we have, in general, the picture I have sketched: a picture of two opposing methods, one struggling to affirm the inwardness of God, the other his transcendence. Where some have found it necessary to resist the *alter* for the sake of the *idem*, dogmatic authority (let us say) in behalf of subjective autonomy; others have, in their turn, and in the face of a resulting and debilitating human pride, found it no less essential that the *idem* be avoided in deference to the *alter*, that subjectivity be set aside in preference to objective revelation. And so it goes. The cycle is apparently not yet ended.

What must be done and what thoughts need thinking seem fairly clear. If it is to break free from its present cycle, and if it is to maintain its contact with tradition, theology today must continue to search, as it seems to have been doing for the greater part of its recent history, for a means of breaking the stalemate between its reductionists and deductionists, while successfully resisting the threats of its skeptical critics. Christian theology seems still in need of a method of knowing that will enable it to see beyond its present apportionments of God to a depth and an inwardness of things inside each other. The challenge, of course, is awesome, and it must not be thought that this essay pretends to have done much more than to state, again, the task itself.

And yet, I certainly hope to have accomplished something more. In the first place, I hope, with Coleridge, to have renewed our appreciation for the forms of knowing in everything we know, for the modes and manners of perception beneath all of our conceptions. In this respect, I join the company of those attempting to appropriate, especially, the insights of phenomenology. The efforts of Husserl himself,

for example, not just in going beyond the "naturalistic standpoint" to "lived experience," but, first, in recognizing that naturalism is precisely *a* standpoint, one among others, are efforts Coleridge would have certainly applauded and efforts we might do well to make our own. Like Husserl, I believe, theologians must "permit *no* authority to deprive us of the right of recognizing all kinds of intuition as equally valuable sources for the justification of knowledge, not even that of 'modern natural science.'" ³¹ Coleridge's attempts to show the penultimacy of solids and surfaces can be seen, in this context, as an important contribution to the questioning and bracketing of such scientific authority.

Second, I hope, in discussing the idea of polarity, to have suggested in particular how very much our habitual sense of material exclusions may have contributed to our present notions of God, man, and world, and to have made it seem less unlikely that our now dominant, empirical perceptions can be made to change. Those who think themselves most free from past restrictions are often, ironically, those who are most resistant to change, and this fact applies especially to contemporary theologians, who seem almost unanimous in their submission to the authority of empirical cognition, and thus to the normative reality of physical objects. Even in the very midst of our searches for a language that will be true to something more than concrete fact, it is concrete fact primarily that we seem obliged, as though by a kind of tacit compact, to preserve, in all our fearful whisperings about the relative and secular. But Coleridgean polarity offers us a most salutary reminder; it reminds us, in the words of Ernst Cassirer, that "man lives with *objects* only in so far as he lives with these *forms*," that "it is not a question of what we see in a certain perspective, but of the perspective itself."³² The theology of Coleridge's "finger-philosophers" need not be absolute.

Finally, I would hope to have helped us glimpse a new agenda for theological thinking, an agenda that is really the recovery of something old. For I hope to have shown that Christian theology is faced now, as always, with the problem, not of *where* to look for God—whether, today, on the near or the far side of subjectivity—but of *how* to look: beyond location and position, with polar sight, toward an experience of mutual inwardness. If we are to retain our traditional allegiances both to God's divinity and otherness and to his being truly known, his familiarity and likeness, then a beginning must be made, I believe, as it was made by Kant, with nothing less than the "forms of intuition" and

³¹Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson; New York: Collier, 1962) 78.

³²*Language and Myth* (trans. Susanne K. Langer, New York: Dover, 1953) 10, 11.

shapes of our perception—though not, like Kant, with the expectation that those forms and shapes are fixed. A beginning needs to be made at a level far deeper than most current, even phenomenological, methodologies have seemed to allow, a level where surface gives way to unity. Because he challenges surface, and because he offers, in return, a method of seeing into unity, Samuel Taylor Coleridge may very well prove a key to a renewed theology's search for the vision and knowledge of God.

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