

Leaving for Germany: Literature, Theory, and Religion

Colin Jager

I begin by reducing William McKelvy's very interesting and informative essay to its governing opposition: that between the secularization theory of the 1960s, dominated by Weber and professional sociology, and the secularization theory of the 1860s, dominated by Victorian literary intellectuals. Though both models are in a sense theoretical, one of them – the German, sociological, one – is closer to what we usually mean by “theory”; the other, based in various ways on the personal narratives of its practitioners, is closer to “literature.”

I.

Let me now propose one possible history of that distinction, from a moment when its terms were still rather unclear.

In chapter 10 of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Samuel Taylor Coleridge offers an account of his doings in 1797, filtered through almost twenty years of opium addiction and disappointment. The nature of a literary career had preoccupied him during this period, Coleridge tells us. Yet such a career was only possible if one leapt fully into the partisan world of politics and “party zeal” – that being the only way to secure readers (Coleridge 251). Coleridge is anxious to present his youthful self as “equidistant” from all the going political parties of the time, and himself as therefore more than a “*mere* literary man” waiting for the next royalty check (Coleridge 250, 278). Disclaiming all political interests, then, and most particularly the French cause, he writes that he retired to the village of Nether Stowey and “devoted [him]self to poetry and to the

study of ethics and psychology" (Coleridge 250). This claim matters because by July of 1797 William and Dorothy Wordsworth had moved into a nearby cottage at Alfoxden, and Charles Lamb and John Thelwall were staying at Nether Stowey. Coleridge's anxiety about party zeal, and especially about the radical Thelwall's presence among them, reaches its doubtful apotheosis in the famous "Spy Nozy" episode. A Home Office spy tailed the group, finally reporting that although Coleridge and his friends were not in fact French agents scouting the coastline for a possible invasion site, they were nevertheless "a mischievous gang of disaffected Englishmen" (Holmes 159). "[O]ur talk ran most upon books," writes Coleridge in the *Biographia*, "and we were perpetually desiring to look at this, and to listen to that; but he [the spy] could not catch a word about politics" (Coleridge 254).

Coleridge's uncertain relationship with the truth has received much critical attention, but I am more interested here in isolating the nascent theory of literary activity that the Coleridge of 1817 is retrospectively constructing for his much younger self. To be a "mere" literary man, in the context of 1796-97, is to be a partisan of one side or another. To pursue "poetry and the study of ethics and psychology," by contrast, is to be "equidistant" from all parties or, alternatively, to have no "word about politics" whatsoever. The first of these – equidistance – is a kind of neutrality, a broad-church theory of literary writing capacious and flexible enough to contain diverse viewpoints without committing to any. The second – not a word about politics – suggests that the business of poetry is something else entirely.

It is just at this precarious juncture, marked by what he calls "the secret spirit of defamation" and of "party zeal," watched over by a Home Office spy and seemingly undecided between literature as an instrument of political neutrality and literature as something altogether different, that Coleridge interrupts his account of 1797 with a potted religious history from the Reformation to the end of the seventeenth century. The "fervour" of the present moment, he says, causes him to reflect that the "magic rod of fanaticism" is always lurking in human history. As examples he cites

the Peasant's War in Germany, the "direful effects of the Anabaptist's tenets," and the English Revolution and its effect on Scotland. After the hiatus of the eighteenth century, such persecuting zeal has now risen again: "the same principles dressed in the ostentatious garb of a fashionable philosophy once more rose triumphant and effected the French Revolution" (Coleridge 251, 256, 256, 257). This "fashionable philosophy" is a placeholder for the usual list of French villains: Voltaire, d'Holbach, de la Mettrie, and the rest. More striking, however, is how Coleridge manages to cut this fashionable philosophy off from its deeper and more scandalous sources in the seventeenth century, especially the Spinozism whose subterranean influence has been so impressively traced by Jonathan Israel in *Radical Enlightenment*. For Coleridge himself, remember, had apparently been speaking enthusiastically of Spinoza on his rambles around the Quantock Hills. If Israel is right, then to talk of Spinoza in 1797 *just is* to talk of revolution. This depoliticization is the real genius of the "Spy Nozy" episode, for all that the Home Office spy can deduce from Coleridge's conversation is that Spinoza is a "man who had made a book and lived long ago" (Coleridge 254).

Having brought matters up to the present day and established that neither poetry nor Spinoza have anything to do with politics, Coleridge then renarrates (with help from the Book of Genesis) his retreat to Stowey:

I retired to a cottage in Somersetshire at the foot of Quantock, and devoted my thoughts and studies to the foundations of religion and morals. Here I found myself all afloat. Doubts rushed in; broke upon me 'from the fountains of the great deep,' and fell 'from the windows of heaven.' The fontal truths of natural religion and the books of Revelation alike contributed to the flood; and it was long ere my ark touched on an Ararat, and rested.
(Coleridge 258)

Most immediately, this extraordinary passage reflects back upon Coleridge's assertion two paragraphs earlier that in the face of sectarian strife

the established Church "became, and now is, not only the brightest example, but our best and only sure bulwark, of toleration!" (Coleridge 257). That thought, eventually developed by Coleridge into a full-blown theory of the clerisy, had a long and distinguished run through the nineteenth century, influencing both the High Church orthodoxy of the Oxford Movement and the broad-church liberalism that was its dialectical other. It contributes powerfully to the literary-theological formulations of mid-century secularization that are McKelvy's interest both in the essay before us and in his important book *The English Cult of Literature*, where he describes a nineteenth century characterized by "unprecedented confusion . . . of literary with religious lives" (McKelvy 13).

Yet however important and influential such theologically-inflected secularization may prove to be, here at its early inception Coleridge immediately registers doubts about its staying power. Officially in 1817 he is a fan of the established church, but having already removed poetry from the conversation due to the ease with which it could be mistaken for radical agitation, Coleridge is left only with "religion and morals" – and they prove an inadequate bulwark against the flood that immediately overwhelms him and that his biographer Richard Holmes refers to as a "crisis in his imaginative powers" (Holmes 167). The change from "poetry and ethics," his proposed topics when he retires to Stowey, to "religion and morals," the topics he settles on after his narration of sectarian strife, can thus be used to open up the question of the relationship between imaginative literature and religion – both for Coleridge and for the broader cultural conversation in which he found himself. With poetry taken off the table, the vaunted institutional flexibility of the Anglican church suddenly looks quite brittle.

It was probably around this time (although scholars disagree about the exact dates) that Coleridge turned from writing the blank verse conversation poems upon which he was working and composed *Kubla Khan*, an irregularly rhymed, incantatory poem at once replete with the watery imagery of the *Biographia* passage and, famously, an archetypal example of the visionary imagination interrupted by the business of mundane life.

(This was also the time – November 1797 – that Coleridge planned his other watery poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.) We recall that the person from Porlock, who interrupts the poet's reverie and spoils his visionary poem, had come on "business," and that it was precisely the business of literature, and the difficulty of making any money at it without committing to a political party, that had occupied Coleridge at the beginning of the *Biographia*'s tenth chapter.

No wonder Coleridge found himself afloat. Walking with his friends and speaking of poetry looks like French Jacobinism. The prosy toleration of the official English church, with its literary corollary of equidistance, looks too much like business. No wonder, then, that Coleridge writes with evident relief: "While my mind was thus perplexed, by a gracious providence for which I can never be sufficiently grateful, the generous and munificent patronage of Mr Josiah, and Mr Thomas Wedgwood enabled me to finish my education in Germany" (Coleridge 262).

We know, of course, what "finishing my education in Germany" meant for Coleridge. It meant Kant. It meant Eichhorn's lectures on the Bible, and the historicist tradition of Michaelis and Herder that stood behind those lectures.¹ And it meant reattaching the historical and poetic qualities of scripture (the tradition of Herder) to questions of epistemology and morals by means of a transcendental argument (the tradition of Kant). It meant, in short, a search for "foundations," both theoretically robust and historically informed, that the English model of institutional toleration simply could not provide, no matter how much business it manufactured.²

II.

I rehearse these tortuous Coleridgean byways in order to approach McKelvy's crucial opposition between English secularization theory, based as it is in the institutional framework of the Anglican Church, and German secularization theory, based in the search for conceptual and historical foundations. McKelvy notes, rightly, that the (Germanic)

1960s version of secularization posited a broadly-based historical decline in religion: it was a sociological theory, after all, and it aimed to model overall trends rather than individual trajectories. The (English) 1860s version that he recommends is by contrast more comfortably at home with special cases: those brave thinkers, like Darwin, who leveraged themselves out of a Christian culture; or those, like Newman, who reinvented it in their own idiom. At the end of his essay McKelvy suggests that, the influence of sociology notwithstanding, the religious chaos of the present moment suggests that we are closer to the literary version of secularization than we are to the theoretical version. If scholars today are looking for ways to model religious change, he concludes, we would do well to listen to Lecky, Newman, Spencer, and Darwin; in their world, like ours, "a wide range of arguments about modern change are being made in a world charged by a variety of religious faiths and their detractors" (McKelvy, "Children," 29 above).

As a description of our contemporary social landscape, with its Tea-Partiers, New Atheists, Christian Zionists, and American exceptionalists, that seems about right. Yet surely the sociological data matter, too. I glance at the news and it seems that fundamentalists are everywhere, yet surveys tell a different story. "The most rapidly growing religious category," I read, "is composed of those Americans who say they have no religious affiliation" (Putnam and Campbell, n.p.). There is no logical incompatibility between these two phenomena, of course. Yet for many of us in the academy, I suspect, the return of public religion and the emptying of the pews seem merely part of the same spectacle. More media events than existential realities, they float free of both historical and conceptual explanation.

Like McKelvy, I think that debates about whether German-style secularization happened or is happening, and what gets to count as evidence for it, are fairly useless. The data can be sliced and diced too many different ways. (For the record, I still think that differentiation, rather than secularization, is a better description of religious change.) But I am made slightly nervous by the literary form of secularization that

McKelvy seeks to put in place of the theoretical form. My worry is, I think, Coleridge's worry: that lacking the conversation about "foundations," we are left merely with business. The passage McKelvy quotes from Lecky's *History*, celebrating modern political economy and the spread of peaceful capitalism around the globe, crystallizes my discomfort. The way that liberal Protestantism sanctified empire has been well studied; but what strikes me even more forcefully is how weirdly Lecky's picture of capital spreading peace around the globe anticipates our own moment. "[E]ach nation," Lecky writes, "has a direct interest in the prosperity of that with which it trades." McKelvy comments gently on Lecky's "liberal sense of providence," but that lets him off too easily. The official story: just as we want everybody to be free to choose their religion, so we want everybody to be free to buy things: religious liberalism and economic liberalism go hand in hand. The real story is rather different: such liberties have tended to arrive by way of tanks and smart bombs. (And then, later, hospitals and privatized oil fields.) Money and peace are not simply isomorphic. And while it is true, as Lecky goes on to observe, that "the different markets of the world are so closely connected, that it is quite impossible for a serious derangement to take place in any one of them without its evil effects vibrating through all" (2.339; qtd. McKelvy, "Children," 21-22 above), it is also true that not all of us share the burden of those derangements in equal measure. Indeed, we are living through such turbulence at this very moment, yet for Blackwater, Halliburton, Goldman Sachs, and others, such uncertainty simply means an opportunity to grab more of what was formerly held in common. My point is simply that the question of whether Lecky's chirpy faith in free enterprise is an example of secularization seems irrelevant; his faith demands a critique, and the most powerful such critique comes from Marx and Weber and contemporary critics of neoliberalism – the very tradition that McKelvy links to 1960s secularization theory.³ There is a critical edge to that tradition, as well as a faith in a world transformed, hard to find in the 1860s secularization theorists, who tend to sit too comfortably within established structures.

Colin Jager, "Leaving for Germany: Literature, Theory, and Religion"

Perhaps it is simply wishful thinking on my part to propose that Coleridge dimly guessed at all of this – guessed that if we left secularization up to well-meaning institutions we would sooner or later find ourselves afloat on a sea of trouble. Still, he was glad to go to Germany, and I am glad that he did.

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Notes

¹ The best description of this intellectual history is still Shaffer.

² Whether Coleridge ever discovered those "foundations" is another story; the thirteenth chapter of *Biographia Literaria* is typically read as a failure to deliver on this promise.

³ For a few examples among many, see Klein and the Midnight Notes Collective.

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