

Wordsworth & Christianity

“And this man is a Republican and at least a *Semi*-atheist”—13 May 1796 Letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to John Thelwall (himself an atheist and radical)

[Atheist here likely refers to beliefs about materialism or traditional Christianity than a simple denial of theism.]

“I can feel more sympathy with the orthodox believer who needs a Redeemer and who, sensible of his own demerits, flies for refuge to Him (though perhaps I do not want one for myself) than with the cold and rational notions of the Unitarian.” --Reported of Wordsworth by the Unitarian Henry Crabb Robinson in his 1812 journal

“[The following are some notes on what he said]:--The atonement is a doctrine which has its foundation in that consciousness of unworthiness and guilt which arises from an upright self-examination. All the orthodox doctrines are warranted by a humble spirit, and all that is best in our moral nature. There is internal evidence for all these doctrines, which are a source of happiness. And the difficulty of comprehending the mysteries of the Gospel is no sufficient reason for rejection. It is necessary to define with precision the doctrines thus received, and the Church of England has encumbered itself by needless and mischievous attempts at explanation. The Athanasian Creed is one of these unhappy excrescences. Nor does the idea of the personality of the Spirit come with such authority, or claim so imperiously our adoption, as the doctrine of the divinity of Christ. The thought that an infinitely pure being can receive satisfaction from the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and accept them as a satisfaction for the sins of the guilty, is declared by Coleridge to be an outrage on common sense. It is a hard saying, nor can I explain it to my satisfaction. I leave this as an awful mystery I am not called on to solve. Coleridge used to declare that the belief in miracle is not a necessary part of a Christian’s creed; but this is contrary to the express and uniform declaration of the Scriptures. And I have no difficulty in believing in miracles, since I consider as superstition the imagined knowledge and certainty which men suppose they have as to the laws of Nature.”--17 January 1836, Reported of Wordsworth by Robinson in his journal

“I am particularly pleased with your distinction between religion in poetry and versified religion. For my part, I have been averse to frequent mention of the mysteries of Christian faith; not from a want of a due sense of their momentous nature, but the contrary. I felt it far too deeply to venture on handling the subject as familiarly as many scruple not to do. . . . Besides general reasons for diffidence in treating subjects of Holy Writ, I have some especial ones. I might err in points of faith, and I should deem my mistakes less to be deprecated because they were expressed in metre. . . . If they [his poems] be from above, they will do their own work in course of time; if not, they will perish as they ought. But scarcely a week passes I do not receive grateful acknowledgements of the good they have done. . . .”—21 February 1840 Letter to Henry Alford

Five Approaches

Approach #1: *Gradualism*: Wordsworth moved slowly from pantheism to theism and eventually returned to Christianity. This process can be seen in *The Prelude*. This position argues that there are even changes in the 1805 version that show an increasing belief in a God behind Nature, rather simply a divine force infused within Nature.

Approach #2: *Crisis of Faith*: In 1805 after Wordsworth’s brother, John, died at sea, William began to question and search for a more stable belief system. Somewhere between 1806 and 1812 he returned to the Church of England. The death of two of Wordsworth’s children in 1812 only increased the need for a system of belief that would support a belief in an afterlife. A similar argument can be made for the structure of *The Prelude*, except here the shift is one that *parallels* traditional Christianity—a lost and broken soul is restored through newly found belief and trust.

Approach #3: *Pragmatism*: Though he returned to the Church of England by 1812, some argue that his beliefs did not substantially change. He was a “Church of England pantheist.” His attendance was a matter of social conservatism and a concern for public respectability. Long before he became Poet Laureate in 1843, Wordsworth increasingly saw his role as one of a public poet, representative of the English people’s traditional religious and social attitudes. The change in the later version of *The Prelude* are only those necessary to bring the poem more in line with these shared public positions.

Approach #4: *“Natural Methodism”*: Charles Lamb once remarked that Wordsworth’s faith was a kind of “natural methodism.” Some have argued that Wordsworth’s rural up-bringing and increasing social conservatism meant that his own attitude towards spirituality had strong imaginative and emotional affinities with Evangelicalism. Thus, his was an evident stress on personal piety, warm feelings towards the divine, an experiencing of God for one’s self, and a call from selfishness and pride to humility and love of others.

Approach #5: *Reception by Christians*: Others stress how Wordsworth was in fact received by later generations of Christians, both during his later years and in the next generation after his death. Wordsworth became for such a great Christian poet, a defender of the faith, and a shaper of spiritual sensibilities. He was especially attractive to those within the Tractarian (i.e. Anglo-Catholic) Movement. They found in his works a language to describe how Nature becomes a prophetic sign of God’s will, and Wordsworth himself took pride that many found his poetry a comfort to them in seasons of testing.

Comments: Notice that these five approach are not entirely at odds with one another. One can see a gradualist shift in Wordsworth’s beliefs while acknowledging that his brother’s death may have accelerated his turn back to the church, even while acknowledging that he also felt a need for public respectability and took pride in the public role his poetry served, as well as in the inspiration it provided to others.

Ecclesiastical Sonnets XXX. Forms for Prayer at Sea (1842/45)

To kneeling Worshippers no earthly floor
 Gives holier invitation than the deck
 Of a storm-shattered Vessel saved from Wreck
 (When all that Man could do availed no more)
 By Him who raised the Tempest and restrains:
 Happy the crew who this have felt, and pour
 Forth for His mercy, as the Church ordains,
 Solemn thanksgiving. Nor will they implore
 In vain who, for a rightful cause, give breath
 To words the Church prescribes aiding the lip
 For the heart's sake, ere ship with hostile ship
 Encounters, armed for work of pain and death.
 Suppliants! the God to whom your cause ye trust
 Will listen, and ye know that He is just.