

Coleridge, Wakefield, and the Suppressed History of Dissent

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GILBERT WAKEFIELD OCCUPIES A SHADOWY AND ELUSIVE POSITION on the margins of Coleridge scholarship, and is rarely mentioned in general works on Romanticism. His significance is occasionally acknowledged in accounts of the network of dissenters Coleridge became involved with in the 1790s. But his extraordinary metamorphosis from classical scholar and biblical critic into one of the fiercest opponents of the Pitt administration is rarely examined in detail. To my knowledge, the only exception in well-known sources is Kenneth R. Johnston's chapter on Wakefield in *Unusual Suspects*.¹

This paper will argue for a more positive revaluation of Wakefield's significance as a voice of radical dissent and as an outspoken critic of the government's policies. Besides enlarging and correcting our view of the reforming and dissenting milieux in which Coleridge participated during the 1790s and early 1800s, there is another reason for being interested in Wakefield just now. The cause for which he stood firm throughout his adult life was that of freedom of religious belief, the principle that was to be enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and which now appears in danger of being forgotten. Indeed, even this passing reference to the U.S. Constitution should remind us that in the 1780s and 1790s, on both sides of the Atlantic, it was impossible to ignore the political implications of a person's religious affiliation.

Even Kenneth Johnston doesn't quite make this connection clear, describing Wakefield as "not even a particularly political writer, although a very polemical one on his subjects of choice: religious controversy, classical and biblical philology, translation, and textual editing" (185). This misses the crucial point that, when Wakefield published his *New Translation of St. Matthew* in 1782, and two years later, *An Enquiry into the Opinions of the Christian Writers of the Three First Centuries*, dedicated (ironically, in view of later events) to Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, he was already setting a course through those disciplines of textual editing, translation, biblical philology, and "religious controversy" that would lead him to involvement in the campaign for repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1787-1790); and then to public criticism of several Church of England bishops—particularly Samuel Horsley (the bishop whom Coleridge also attacked fiercely in the 1795 Lectures), and later, the same Richard Watson—and of such prominent lay apologists for the Church of England as William Wilberforce.

¹ Kenneth R. Johnston, *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* (OUP, 2013), 185-204. Wakefield is mentioned in Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 27-9, 35; Anthony John Harding, "Radical Bible: Coleridge's 1790s West Country Politics," *English Romantic Writers and the West Country*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129-51; Anthony John Harding, "Introduction," *On the Bible*, vol. 2 of *Coleridge's Responses*, ed. John Beer, 3 vols (Continuum, 2007), 6, 16-17, 19. Bruce E. Graver provides an excellent brief account of Wakefield in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online, ref: odnb 28418).

It is the *Letter to William Wilberforce*, in fact, that offers one of the clearest summations of Wakefield's stance as a committed dissenter, condemning not only all kinds of church establishment but "all human formularies of religious doctrine, all compulsory subscriptions to creeds, and articles, and canons" as "a profligate usurpation on the unalienable rights of private judgement" and a "rebellion" against Jesus Christ.² It is rather typical of Wakefield that this strongly-worded attack on the Established Church is immediately followed by a five-line quotation from Vergil's *Georgics* (a passage about the treatment of ulcers in sheep), and then by a prophecy of better times: "Such antichristian phantoms, I have no doubt, will soon vanish, like the beasts of darkness, before the piercing beams of Liberty and Science" (23).

Wakefield's connection with Jesus College, Cambridge, began (in a sense) at birth: his father, Rector of St. Nicholas's Church in Nottingham, was a Jesuan.³ By great good fortune, when Gilbert was of an age to apply for admission to university, a scholarship became available for an undergraduate attending Jesus College, endowed by the Archdeacon of Nottingham and restricted to sons of clergymen "born in that town." Serendipitously, too, the then-Master of the college, Dr. Caryl, was from Nottingham and knew the Reverend Wakefield well (*Memoirs* 1:61-2). In his *Memoirs*, Wakefield writes of his admission to the college: "my transport and enthusiasm, at going thither, are still alive" (1:62). His regret at leaving Cambridge in April 1778 seems equally heartfelt: "*Five* years and a *half*, with little interruption, did I pass in this blissful seat, in the enjoyments of friendship, and the pursuits of learning" (1:145). It is very evident from the *Memoirs* that despite his estrangement from the Church of England, Wakefield retained a sense of deep gratitude to the University, particularly to his college, for having enabled him to realize his vocation as a scholar and as a minister of religion.

Hard work and self-denial were natural to him. He claims that while at Cambridge he "rose, almost without exception, by *five o'clock* winter and summer" (*Memoirs* 1:87). He also admits to setting a high value on complete candour: a "disposition, which has always induced me to speak of things as they *are*, without dissimulation, and without restraint" (*Memoirs* 1:88-9). Though never a Quaker, he had a Quaker's dislike of titles and ceremonies, and of the polite, evasive expressions that many people use to conceal their real opinions. There is a certain purity of purpose in Wakefield that, from one angle, looks like arrogance, but from another, more like the unworldliness of the dedicated scholar. This "constitutional intrepidity in the cause of truth" (*Memoirs* 1:237) naturally caused him some difficulty in the first few years of his career. After his ordination as Deacon in March 1778, at the age of twenty-two, he took a post as curate in a parish church in Stockport; then became curate at St Peter's in Liverpool (again for a brief period, though it proved a formative experience); then joined the teaching staff of Warrington Academy

² *A Letter to William Wilberforce, Esq.* (London, 1797), 22.

³ Gilbert Wakefield, *Memoirs*, ed. John Towill Rutt and Arnold Wainwright, 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1804), 1:12-13.

as tutor in classical languages, from 1779 to 1783.

During all of these relatively short-lived appointments, Wakefield strove to deepen his knowledge not only of Hebrew (which he began learning during the Long Vacation of 1775 [*Memoirs* 1:99-100]) and New Testament Greek, but also of Arabic, Syriac, Chaldee, “Æthiopic,” Persian, and Coptic (1:235), pursuing the goal he had set himself while still an undergraduate: “to attain a complete mastery of the *phraseology* of *both Scriptures*, by a close attention to the *idiom* in which they are written” (1:114).

There is a rigorous logic to Wakefield’s progress towards severing his ties with the Church of England. Since ordination as a priest requires subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, conscience, for such a man as Wakefield, dictates that the doctrines affirmed therein (most particularly, the Trinity, Article I; the Two Natures of Christ, II; and the Atonement, XXXI) should be tested for their correspondence with the words of Scripture: not the King James Bible, which he knows is unreliable as a guide to the sense of the original Hebrew and Greek, but the best ancient texts, all the known variants carefully compared, with attention to “the *idiom* in which they are written.” If the doctrines fail this test, then he is duty bound to refuse subscription.

Already in his *Essay on Inspiration*, published in 1781 when he was still at Warrington, Wakefield has something of a missionary spirit: “I wish, with the most ardent Aspirations, to see the Foundations of Christianity entirely disencumbered of that Mass of Rubbish, which IGNORANCE, ARTIFICE, and SUPERSTITION have heaped upon them, and restored to their pristine State of APOSTOLICAL SIMPLICITY”.⁴ The thorough annotations to his *New Translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Warrington, 1782) exemplify the challenge to Trinitarianism implicit in a scholar’s explication of such terms as “a Son of God,” as understood by Greek-speaking Jews in the first century CE (*Translation* 57, on Matthew 4:3).

Wakefield’s writings on matters of doctrine, then, could hardly be anything other than “political”, at least implicitly. But with the repeated refusal of Parliament to repeal the Test Acts (repeal was moved in 1787, 1789 and 1790, and rejected each time), Wakefield, along with most of his fellow Unitarians, underwent something of a political awakening. As John Aikin expressed it (with characteristic acerbity): “all arguments derived from your *rights* have been treated with the utmost contempt; and it has been thought sufficient for the rejection of your just claims, to shew, that some possible changes in the present distribution of power might be the remote consequence of admitting them.”⁵ Dissenters were realizing, in short, that despite having given repeated assurances that he would steer a repeal bill through Parliament, Pitt had no intention of following through, because the political marginalization of Dissenters was necessary to protect the interests of the landed class, as well as those of the Church. They would have to wait more than three decades before

⁴ *An Essay on Inspiration: considered chiefly with respect to the Evangelists* (Warrington: Printed . . . for the Author, 1781), 138.

⁵ [John Aikin], *An Address to the Dissidents of England on their Late Defeat* (London, 1790), 7-8.

the last of these penalties was removed.

This awakening or radicalization coincided with another change in Wakefield's personal circumstances. After several unsuccessful attempts to attract enough pupils to make a living as an independent teacher of classical languages, in July 1790 he accepted the post of Classical Tutor at New College, Hackney, founded in 1786 by a group of dissenting ministers that included Richard Price (Price had initially opposed the appointment, as had Joseph Priestley [see Graver, *ODNB*]). Wakefield had certainly taken political positions before this move to Hackney: for example, during the American Revolutionary War, when he was curate at St Peter's in Liverpool, he refused to read the required prayers against the American colonists (*Memoirs* 1:197). This stance was consistent with the core principles of Wakefield's later political writings: that Christianity calls for both "liberty" (freedom from political coercion *and* freedom of religious belief) and social equality, the two things being in principle inseparable; and, as a necessary consequence, that a Christianity truly based on the New Testament cannot be reconciled with an Established Church.

In his biography of Coleridge's father, J. C. C. Mays shows that the Fast Day proclamations had forced John Coleridge to make what may have been uncomfortable compromises for him, too. In December 1776, when the first Fast Day of the American war was proclaimed, John Coleridge, as vicar at Ottery St. Mary, had to choose between obeying the proclamation to the letter, or toning down the authorised form of prayer, and refusing to follow the standard patriotic line in the sermon. Mays suggests that – while acknowledging the lawful authority of government by choosing Romans 13:1 as his text ("Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers . . .") – John Coleridge avoided referring to "triumph in arms," stressing instead "pardon for sins." In this way, he "turn[ed] the occasion in a different direction from the customary celebration of king and country."⁶

Wakefield would countenance no such modulated pronouncements. In a pamphlet dated 8 February 1794, he wrote: "*Christianity* ... is no other, than the cause of liberty, and the consequent happiness of the human race: a liberty and happiness only to be raised on the foundation of that *equality* ascertained by the laws of our creation, and ratified by the *gospel* in every page, which acknowledges no distinction of *bond* or *free*."⁷ What particularly aroused Wakefield's disgust at the policies of Pitt, and the bishops who preached in support of them, was that they were waging war against the French in the name of protecting religion: "who, but *tyrants* that delight in war;—who but *furious fanatics*, an *established Clergy*, and a *venal Parliament*, ever yet talked of crushing *Atheism*, and promoting *Christianity*, by the *sword*?" (*Spirit*, 22-3). Even his fellow Dissenters are criticized for abjectly complying with the government directives requiring the population to observe a fast and offer up prayers for victory (20-1).

⁶ J. C. C. Mays, *Coleridge's Father: Absent Man, Guardian Spirit* (Friends of Coleridge, 2014), 401.

⁷ *The Spirit of Christianity* (London, 1794), 26-7.

That Coleridge shared these views can be shown from his 1795 *Lectures*, *The Watchman*, and several of the poems published in his 1796 volume, especially Effusions III, IV, and V and *Religious Musings*. The parallels between some of the sentiments expressed in *Religious Musings* and Wakefield's 1794 pamphlet were pointed out in 1957 by Kathleen Coburn (CN 1, 104n). Particularly relevant, in this context, is a note on two leaves bound into the "Rugby Manuscript," headed "Notes on RELIGIOUS MUSINGS." A draft for one of the footnotes to the poem, it reads in part:

I deem that the teaching of the Gospel for Hire is wrong ... By a PRIEST
I mean a Man who holding the scourge of Power in ... his Right Hand
and a Bible (*translated by Authority*) in ... his Left, doth necessarily ...
make the Bible & the Scourge to be associated Ideas⁸

Another draft footnote, intended for a later part of the poem, reads: "They who perceive any real difference between the Church of Rome & that of England possess microscopic optics, to which I have no pretension! ...Are they not both allied with the Powers of this World?"⁹

Wakefield's views did not change, in any essential respects, between his 1794 pamphlet and the 1798 *Reply to Some Parts of the Bishop of Landaff's Address to the People of Great Britain*, the publication that brought down on his head a charge of seditious libel and—after a protracted delay—a two-year gaol sentence. The only change was that Wakefield's rhetoric became even more bitter and angry, perhaps because, as Johnston perceptively remarks, "Like Blake and Coleridge, Wakefield ... realizes that *nothing* could be commensurate with the intemperance, the extremism, being exercised against them" (*Suspects*, 189). It is hard to disagree with Johnston's conclusion that the prosecutions targeting Wakefield and others who criticized Bishop Watson's *Address*, such as Benjamin Flower, were intended to single out scapegoats and make them "bear the onus of [the government's] resolve to quash reform once and for all" (*Suspects* 192).

Wakefield was especially vulnerable: he was so committed a dissenter that he dissented from Dissent itself. His 1791 pamphlet on *The Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship* had offended many prominent dissenters, by arguing that the very idea of regularly gathering together for worship was contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. As Barbauld wrote, "he has not found another [church] with which he is inclined to associate".¹⁰ Yet he did have friends in Parliament, and among intellectuals and writers such as Erasmus Darwin and Alexander Geddes. During his imprisonment in Dorchester gaol, he was visited by prominent Whigs—Charles James Fox, the Duke of Bedford, Lord Holland—and the very considerable sum of £5,000 was

⁸ PW [CC] 2 Part 1:240

⁹ PW [CC] 2 Part 1:245; compare LPR 210-11.

¹⁰ Quoted in Gina Luria Walker, *The Idea of Being Free: A Mary Hays Reader* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006), 133. See also in this issue, Tim Whelan's introduction to his website dedicated to Mary Hays, one of whose works was a defence of Wakefield's pamphlet on public worship.

raised to assist him and his family. He survived his release from Dorchester gaol for less than four months, dying of typhoid fever on 9 September 1801.

Coleridge knew Wakefield both in person and through his published works. George Dyer introduced Coleridge to Wakefield in late August, 1794, at Dyer's London lodgings.¹¹ Although, to my knowledge, the earliest reference to Wakefield in any of Coleridge's writings dates from 1794, Coleridge would certainly have heard his name mentioned at Jesus College, probably as one speaks of a brilliant but prickly former colleague who was notorious for his radical views, and opted to rusticate himself, thus sparing a nervous administration the awkwardness of banishing him. Coleridge certainly knew others (such as William Frend) whose critical attitude towards the Thirty-Nine Articles was similar to Wakefield's. Several of these Cambridge men, including Frend, attended services at St Andrew's Street Baptist Church. Its resident minister was Robert Robinson, known for tolerating a wide spectrum of theological opinion among members of his congregation.

In February 1795, Coleridge (then in Bristol) wrote to Dyer at Lincoln's Inn Fields reminding him when he next saw Wakefield to "mention my name" (CL I 153). In March, he wrote again with a similar request (CL I 156). Wakefield, always interested in translations of Latin literature by his contemporaries, was listed as a potential subscriber to Coleridge's proposed *Imitations from the Modern Latin Poets* (CL I 101). And in 1796, when Coleridge was putting together a collection of poems to be published by Joseph Cottle, Wakefield was one of the notable contemporaries whom he intended to honour with a sonnet. The Gutch notebook lists Wakefield's name along with those of Joseph Priestley, the anti-war peer Earl Stanhope, Friedrich Schiller, and several others. However, like some of the other poems intended for this volume, the sonnet on Wakefield does not appear to have been written, and only the title appears in Mays' edition of the *Poetical Works* (PW 1, 2, 263-4).

There are few later references to Wakefield in the *Letters* and *Notebooks*. Writing to Thomas Poole in September 1799 (when Wakefield would have been serving his time in Dorchester gaol), Coleridge reports that he had dinner with Thomas Northmore, one of Wakefield's former pupils (CL I 528). And in January, 1804, Coleridge visited William Shepherd, a Liverpool Unitarian who had looked after Wakefield's children (CN II, 849n).

Coleridge later turned against the Unitarianism he had embraced so fervently in the 1790s. In *Lay Sermons* he accuses Unitarians of being arrogantly given to picking and choosing what to believe and what not to believe, and in the process tearing apart the "divine organism of the Bible" (LS

¹¹ Nicholas Roe cites a letter from Dyer to Rev. Mr. Carey dated 24 May 1836, in the library of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, establishing that Coleridge met Wakefield while visiting Dyer in London. (Roe, *Politics* 27). Timothy Whelan states that this meeting must have taken place in late August 1794 ("George Dyer and Dissenting Culture, 1777-1796," *Charles Lamb Bulletin* n.s. 155 [Spring, 2012], 26). On the network of dissenters in Cambridge, London and the West Country that existed during Coleridge's time at Jesus College and later helped to form his circle of friends, see also Timothy Whelan, "Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joseph Hughes: An Ecumenical friendship, 1795-1831," *Coleridge Bulletin* ns 50 (Winter, 2017), 95.

181-2).¹² Unlike Wordsworth, who smuggles into *The Excursion* an oblique tribute to Wakefield by way of an unattributed quotation from George Dyer's 1802 poem "On the Death of Gilbert Wakefield" (Johnston, *Suspects* 202), Coleridge makes no further mention of him, even where one might expect him to—in, for instance, "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit." It seems almost a willed forgetting of a name that had become synonymous with principled Christian opposition to the war.

Yet Coleridge continued to share many of Wakefield's judgments and attitudes, as a biblical critic and even as a critic of the worldliness and intellectual laziness of too many Anglican clergy. The view that it was essential for ministers of religion and the educated laity to read the Bible with full awareness of its character as a *historical* document, or more accurately as an assemblage of documents from many different periods of history, was one of Wakefield's signature arguments—one that he deployed against deist republicans such as Thomas Paine, as well as against complacent bishops such as Samuel Horsley. (Compare Coleridge's description of the Scriptures as "a series of Books written by diverse Authors in diverse ages," CN IV, 5337, f35.) As Stephen H. Ford has recently argued, in the 1820s Coleridge's "central theme" was "education": "Christianity is not fixed in a single period, but changes with the sciences."¹³ Other Wakefieldian preoccupations that Coleridge took over include a strong dislike of the Athanasian Creed, which Coleridge refers to in an 1827 notebook entry as a "*silly Gabble of a Monk in a fury*" (CN V, 5490; compare Wakefield, *Essay* 15-16, and *Memoirs* 1:20-4).

Though Coleridge's actual contacts with him were fleeting and mostly indirect, from 1789 until his death in 1801 Wakefield was a distinctive and courageous voice of radical dissent, a scholar and controversialist that Coleridge must have known about during his time at Jesus College (something that is admittedly difficult to prove conclusively), and for a ten-year period from 1790 until 1799 an outspoken opponent both of the Pitt administration itself and of the way the Established Church allowed itself to be used as a propaganda machine for the government. Coleridge not only shared Wakefield's sense of outrage at this perversion of Christian faith, but evidently planned to write a poem honouring Wakefield for being the voice of sanity speaking out against the ruthless and illegal actions of the government as it set about silencing its opponents. Coleridge may have put Unitarian radicalism behind him, and in published writings tried to misrepresent this phase in his life as mere youthful folly. But it is clear from the *Notebooks*, the "Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit," and other works that remained unpublished during his lifetime, that much of what he learned from such Unitarians as Gilbert Wakefield stayed with him. Wakefield should be recognized along with better-known figures such as Priestley, Barbauld, and Godwin as an integral part of the intellectual milieu that contributed to the formation of Coleridge's mind.

¹² He also criticized the Unitarians' interest in miracles as "evidences" of Christianity: SWF I 403.

¹³ "Coleridge as Philosopher of Missions," *Harvard Theological Review* 111.2 (2018):226.