Unquiet Things

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I found myself all afloat.
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 10 (1817)

In the Preface attached to “Kubla Khan” when it was finally published in 1816, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that he took an “anodyne” and then fell asleep in his chair as he was reading some lines from a seventeenth-century travel book called *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. He reported that he “continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he had the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; . . . without any sensation or consciousness of effort.” When he woke up, he “instantly and eagerly” started writing down the lines given him in his dream. Before long, though, a “person on business from Porlock” interrupted him, and when he returned to his desk all that remained was a “vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision” together with a few scattered images.

The likely fabrication of this entire episode notwithstanding, “Kubla Khan” has long stood as the archetypal example of the visionary imagination interrupted by the business of mundane life. The goal of this chapter is to reconstruct the import and meaning of this event, in particular its appeal to Purchas as the context of its visionary dreaming. The Purchas encounter, I shall argue, is an intervention in the two liberal models of secularism bequeathed by the eighteenth century: toleration on the one hand, and on
the other the literary interpretations that would eventually yield textual criticism of the Bible and the so-called Higher Criticism. The first of these is quintessentially English, the second quintessentially German. By turning to Purchas, Coleridge avoided both options, reaching back instead to the seventeenth century, when the definition of “religion” was still in flux, and the settled complacency of the post-1688 consensus had not yet taken hold. “Kubla Khan” invites an interpretation of its speaker as a kind of visionary, trying to rebuild Kubla’s dome within his soul or mind. But the medium for that rebuilding is a song sung by an Abyssinian maid, and a reading of Purchas’s comments on Abyssinia reveals not an idealized utopia but a textual paradise made up of books that encompass all the religions of the world. Thus an interpretation of “Kubla Khan” in the context of the whole of Purchas’s text—its mission and development, rather than simply its imagery—will reveal a different picture of religion, one worldly rather than otherworldly, less a floating dome than a room full of books. And thus the poem’s final image, of a prophetic singer encircled by a fearful and uncomprehending crowd, is in my interpretation not an endorsement of the visionary mode but rather an anticipation of the kind of misreading that characterizes the liberal tradition. Thinkers in this tradition, from Locke to Habermas, stress exactly what the 1688 consensus established: that it is necessary to “settle the just Bounds that lie between” religion and the state. That penchant for boundary drawing, I hope to show, misrecognizes the very thing it would claim to manage.

A Word About Politics

Chapter 10 of the Biographia Literaria (1817) is mostly taken up with Coleridge’s retrospective account of his efforts twenty years earlier to construct an independent literary career. In 1797 this was a perilous business. Trying to drum up support for his short-lived periodical, The Watchman, Coleridge encountered the same kind of obsessive focus on business that had supposedly derailed “Kubla Khan.” The first potential subscriber, a “rigid Calvinist . . . in whom length was so predominant over breadth that he might almost have been borrowed for a foundry-poker,” told him that he did not have time to read anything except the Bible. The second, a Manchester cotton merchant, asked for a “bill or invoice,” glanced at it, crumpled it up, and “without another syllable retired into his counting-house.” Together, the Calvinist
and cotton merchant anticipate the kind of argument Weber was to make some one hundred years later about the secularizing spirit of the Protestant ethic. In such a world, Coleridge seems to assert, making a living from writing was impossible. Earlier in the chapter he had already advised aspiring writers to sell their copyrights, for it was simply too financially and emotionally risky to be both author and publisher: “fifty pounds and ease of mind are of more real advantage to a literary man, than the chance of five hundred with the certainty of insult and degrading anxieties” (243). Anxious to present his youthful self as more than a hack waiting for the next royalty check, Coleridge writes that he eventually disclaimed all political interests and retired to a drafty cottage at Nether Stowey in December 1796. Anxious and depressed, the only breadwinner in a crowded house that included his pregnant and unhappy wife, Sarah, he turned more frequently to laudanum.3 “I saw plainly,” he writes, “that literature was not a profession by which I could expect to live” (250).

Coleridge’s plan at Nether Stowey was to devote himself “to poetry and to the study of ethics and psychology” (250). Yet politics intruded here, too, in the shape of problematic friends. By July 1797 Charles Lamb and John Thelwall were staying at Nether Stowey, and William and Dorothy Wordsworth had moved into a nearby cottage. Coleridge’s anxiety about what he called “party zeal,” and especially about the radical Thelwall’s presence among them, reached its doubtful apotheosis in the famous “Spy Nozy” episode, during which a Home Office spy tailed the group and finally reported that although they were not in fact scouting the coastline for a possible French invasion site, they were nevertheless “a mischievous gang of disaffected Englishmen.”4

Coleridge’s uneven relationship with the truth has received plenty of attention, but I am more interested here in the different models of literary activity that the Coleridge of 1817 is retrospectively constructing for his younger self. To be a “mere literary man” (278) at this moment was to be a partisan of one side or another, and so to “pursue literature as a trade” (274). This brought him too near to the spirit of capitalism, not to mention too near the partisan spirit of the times. To study “poetry, . . . ethics and psychology,” by contrast, was to renounce such immediate concerns, and thus avoid both the countinghouse and the prison house: “Our talk ran most upon books,” writes Coleridge of his rambles with his friends, “and we were perpetually desiring each other to look at this, and to listen to that; but [the spy] could not catch a word about politics” (254). Then, after a rapid history
of religious conflict during the seventeenth century, the *Biographia* passage culminates with an invocation of a decidedly depoliticized model of institutional toleration. Coleridge celebrates 1688/89 as the beginning of a new peace: “A wise Government followed; and the established Church became, and now is, not only the brightest example, but our best and only sure bulwark, of toleration! The true and indispensable bank against a new inundation of persecuting zeal—*Esto perpetua* [May it last forever]!” (257).

Despite appearances to the contrary, there is an internal logic to the way that Coleridge runs together religious history, Spinoza, the French Revolution, and institutional toleration. But we need to look back again at the latitudinarian consensus of 1688 in order to understand why one might tell the story in this fashion. Once in power, William largely left the care of the Anglican Church to his wife, whose preferred inner circle included men of formidable learning and liberal inclination. John Locke, Gilbert Burnet (like Locke an exile living in Holland during the years of James II), and John Tillotson (the new archbishop of Canterbury), together with Edward Stillingfleet, Samuel Clark, and Richard Bentley, made up the intellectual core of English latitudinarianism. Despite some important differences of opinion, their commitment to reason and their connections with Cambridge aligned them with the generally Newtonian sensibility that would come to dominate intellectual discussion in the early years of the eighteenth century. They shared a tone and a manner, one dedicated to intellectual and social moderation and comfortable and successful within the structures of Whig patronage.

Convinced that Enlightenment and Anglicanism were fellow travelers, these men found themselves in the right place at the right time, at the “conjunction of political crisis and intellectual revolution, buoyed up by the stimulating social atmosphere provided by swarms of refugees, pamphlet wars, coffee houses and clubs, and the international web of the republic of letters.” Reinforcing positions already established by the Royal Society, they aimed to preserve a civilized public against sectarianism and enthusiasm of all kinds, not only Catholic and absolutist “mystery” but also Puritan antinomianism and the rumblings of Continental republicanism. Though there remained a radical Enlightenment culture (deists, freethinkers, republicans) off to one side, the English Enlightenment was in general a more moderate affair than its Continental cousins. A broadly liberal consensus came to power with William, and after some back-and-forth, secured its hegemony following
George I’s ascension in 1714. Unlike those in other European nations, therefore, England’s progressive thinkers were establishment rather than oppositional figures. The post-1688 Anglican Church and the philosophical Enlightenment were thus not merely intellectual compatriots; there was a stronger, mutually reinforcing unity of purpose in their outlook, aims, and sensibilities.8

It is hardly a surprise, then, that the Toleration Act was a cautious document. It permitted Dissenters to worship in their own meetinghouses, so long as they were registered and kept the doors unlocked. Dissenting ministers still had to subscribe to some of the Thirty-Nine Articles; all had to swear loyalty to the king and deny transubstantiation, and the civil disabilities established in the 1660s still applied to them. Although something like half a million citizens had legal protection for the first time, then, others, particularly Catholics, remained outside the protection of the law. The very moderation of the law, which institutionalized what Roy Porter nicely calls an “unshakeable commitment to . . . freedom, Protestantism, patriotism and prosperity,” meant that even conservative High Churchmen would henceforth be playing by rules established by Whigs and latitudinarians.9

Having brought matters up to the present day, having drawn a firm line between literary-philosophical talk and political sedition, and having finally described the established church’s policy of toleration as a bulwark and bank against the floods of persecuting zeal now emanating from France, Coleridge strangely renarrates his retreat to Stowey: “I retired to a cottage in Somersetshire,” he writes, “and devoted my thoughts and studies to the foundations of religion and morals” (258). The first time around, he had written of his desire to study poetry, ethics, and psychology. Now, after the Spy-Nozy episode indicates that poetry was too easily mistaken for the radical Enlightenment, he turns to engineering: to foundations, bulwarks, and embankments. Yet he finds none of these, but rather an ocean of textual sources that immediately overwhelms him:

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. (258)
This extraordinary passage, resonant with the account of the flood in Genesis, raises immediate questions about the strength of the earthworks that Cole-
ridge had thrown up only two paragraphs earlier. Coleridge’s biographer
Richard Holmes refers to this moment as a “crisis in his imaginative pow-
ers.” In order to protect himself from the charge of sedition Coleridge had
removed poetry to its own apolitical domain: the spy could not catch “a
word about politics.” Now sequestered, poetry was no longer available to aid
the search for the foundations of religion and morals, nor, consisting as it did
tirely of the limited latitude of the established church, could it be part of
the bulwark against persecuting zeal. This opens Coleridge to the flood of
biblical criticism that had been shaking foundations and overflowing
embankments, at least in elite intellectual circles, for a generation. Suddenly,
the prosaic institutional toleration of the Anglican Church looked rather
feeble.

No wonder Coleridge found himself afloat. Walking with his friends and
speaking of poetry looked like French Jacobinism; the prosy toleration of the
official English church looked too much like business; and the floodwaters of
textual criticism were rising. And no wonder, then, that he writes with evi-
dent 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” (262). We know, of course, what finishing his
education in Germany meant for Coleridge. It meant Kant. It meant Eich-
horn’s lectures on the Bible, and the historicist tradition of Michaelis and
Herder that stood behind those lectures. And it meant reattaching the his-
torical 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,” theoreti-
cally robust, historically informed, and poetically sensitive, that the prosaic
English model of institutional toleration apparently could not provide.

Could I Revive Within Me

As Coleridge knew all too well, scripture changed in the eighteenth century.
Especially in Germany, a new method of reading the Bible as a form of
literature definitively shifted textual interpretation onto the historical-critical
ground now familiar to literary scholars. This story—of a new method of
biblical interpretation and its gradual infiltration of elite and middle-brow literate culture throughout the North Atlantic—is a complex one. But of the many and tangled strands of this intellectual web, I wish to emphasize here the unique way that German philosopher-theologians like Herder, Michaelis, and Eichhorn knit together historicism and universalism, two structures of feeling traditionally at odds with one another, by means of what they called “poetry.” Freed from the weight of interpretive tradition, the Bible in Herder’s hands could be received as its first readers and hearers received it, a record of the idioms, styles, and thought patterns of its time and place of origin. Following this impulse, Michaelis, Eichhorn, and eventually Coleridge learned to treat scriptural texts historically and culturally—as examples of the literature of a Semitic people, to be sympathetically interpreted according to their particular mind and spirit. This is the dream of “Kubla Khan” as the poem draws near its lyrical conclusion:

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she play’d,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song . . . (lines 37–43)

On the one hand, such “revivals” undertaken within the mind of the sympathetic interpreter undermined the uniqueness of Scripture and humanized its interpretation, shifting the focus from a timeless message of salvation to the conditions of religious experience and the historical circumstances that informed the texts. On the other hand, this method produced a Christianity that was once again universal. The Old Testament might be only the literary expression of a particular people and a particular time, freshly revealed now as a historical document pieced together “from a diversity of culturally uprooted mythologies.” But this in turn positioned Christianity as “the culmination and expression of the whole range of human religious demands.” As Coleridge’s speaker imagines it, his internal revival would allow him to rebuild Kubla’s dome, but now in a visionary mode, in the air, where all could see it. Christianity was the true universalism—not because it was true while other religions were false, but because it recognized and synthesized into a grander whole the inner truth those other religions contained.
Of course, it is hard not to be skeptical about a solution like this one. Rather than facing the facts—that the Bible was a human document, written long after the events it claimed to describe, and full of inconsistencies—the school of Herder, Michaelis, and Eichhorn declared that the facts did not matter very much. Whether Moses really wrote the Pentateuch, or Noah’s flood really covered the whole earth, whether John of Patmos was really John the Evangelist, or whether either of them were the disciple whom Jesus loved best—these things mattered less than the visionary character of the accounts in which they appeared, which expressed and exemplified a kind of truth that surpassed questions of empirical evidence. This opened the door to a certain kind of relativism but extracted from it not a radical philosophe-style critique of priestcraft but a new and hugely influential form of Christian universalism. By making faith and culture largely coterminous, the mythological critics preserved both. They got to be in the intellectual vanguard and yet felt no existential threat.

There is no question that we can read “Kubla Khan” in exactly this context; forty years ago Elinor Shaffer did so, and brilliantly. For Shaffer the poem was a poetic investigation of the conditions of religious experience, a meditation on how to handle a new set of intellectual tools that were historicist and relativist on the one hand, and timeless and universal on the other. She reconstructs the argument of “Kubla Khan” this way: to be asleep in the West is not to be nodding over our hymnbooks but to be awake to new kinds of spiritual possibilities. And this is why it finally does not matter whether Coleridge’s dream actually happened, or whether he was where he said he was, or whether he was really interrupted by a man from Porlock. Such literal-mindedness is exactly what the new biblical criticism pushes aside: the vagueness of the whole “person from Porlock” episode is a performative instance of exactly this new intellectual reality. The visionary sleep of “Kubla Khan,” in other words, just is the condition of religious experience and biblical truth in a historicizing age.17

In this short set of passages in the heart of the Biographia Literaria, then, amid typically Coleridgean digression, pedantry, and self-doubt, we encounter a basic question about the fate of British romanticism and the narrative of European modernity: will it be English (institutional, liberal) or will it be German (philosophical, conservative)? That apparent choice has structured, even at many removes, most of the criticism of the era’s literature. Less remarked on is that both of these possibilities depend on a secularization narrative: in the English case, that Anglican latitudinarianism, officially born
in 1688 but with roots in the middle of the seventeenth century, can be secularized sufficiently to promote tolerance beyond its own sectarian genealogy; in the German case, that the spiritual rewriting of religious tradition will prove sufficiently capacious for all. However we choose, then, one thing seems certain: the future will be secular.

And perhaps it will be, but for a twenty-first-century reader trying to make sense of the continuing salience of religion, that choice seems to foreclose on a great deal of contemporary experience. Is there a third path? I believe that there is, but it requires first that we return to Purchas in order to reconstruct a different, seventeenth-century discourse of religion as neither Lockean belief nor Herderian spirituality but rather as an always-already-worldly phenomenon.

Addiction

I know not by what naturall inclination . . . (Purchas, “To the Reader”)

If Coleridge did indeed read Purchas’s introductory note (“To the Reader”) when he turned to his book in late 1797 or early 1798, he would have found there a relevant example of the tension between the business of literature and the business of life that occupied him in Chapter 10 of the *Biographia Literaria* and, supposedly, in the Preface to “Kubla Khan.” Samuel Purchas was an Anglican minister, first in Essex and later in London. In his leisure time he collected and organized lengthy travel narratives, which he assembled into two massive, and very popular, books. While Purchas notes in a somewhat perfunctory way that his researches showcase the superiority of Protestant Christianity, one might nevertheless wonder why a minister should devote so much time and energy to studying other religions. Indeed Purchas himself seems rather uncertain about this. “Being,” he writes in his address to the reader, “I know not by what naturall inclination, addicted to the studie of Historie, my heart would sometimes object a selfe-love, in following my private delights in that kind. At last, I resolved to turne the pleasures of my studies into studious paines, that others might againe, by delightful studie, turn my paines into their pleasure.”18 The faintly masturbatory crossing of pleasure with pain may look back to Spenser, but in the context of a self-confessed “addiction” it also looks forward to Coleridge.
When he says that he is “addicted to history” Purchas means that he has given himself to it fully and unreservedly, that he is attached to history to the point of surrendering his freedom, and that this inclination is itself something of a mystery to him. This is the standard meaning of “addiction” by the late seventeenth century, when the word completed its transition from legal discourse—in Roman law an addicens is one who authoritatively transfers a thing, and to be addicted to someone was to be legally made over to him—to a description of a subjective condition that implies a weakness of the will: one gives oneself over rather than being given over. Although addiction was always opposed to free will, then, it was now opposed in a new way: from being bound to another through no will of one’s own, to being bound to one’s own base desires because of insufficient willpower.19 There is something immoderate or compulsive about addiction in this sense, “an ouermoche addiction to priuate appetites,” in the words of the OED’s initial 1532 citation of the new term.

This gradual shift from external to internal bondage, and from legal to moral constraint, mirrors other transitions in the early modern period, among them those of religion itself. This is the transition discussed earlier in this book: that “religion” in our modern sense depends on a new understanding of what it might mean to “believe” in God. In a departure from medieval conceptions of “belief” as a relationship of trust, belief in sixteenth-century Europe took on an increasingly epistemological charge. The question of religion came more and more to depend on what people believed and whether those beliefs were true, while the thing called “religion” became the sum total of the propositions in which one professed belief.20 Because salvation meant believing in the correct package of propositions, it became increasingly important for believers to reflexively grasp what it was they were professing to believe. Accordingly, the content of those beliefs was construed epistemologically, as a body of information about where salvation was to be found. Subjected to tests, confessions, documentation, and other mechanisms of control, comparison, and standardization, modern religion entered the domain of modern knowledge.

These discursive transformations of both religion and addiction are best understood against the background of an epistemological revolution that takes in Cartesian dualism, the development of modern science, and the efforts of reformers and counter-reformers to make religion into an object of cognition. Intellectual historians describe this change in various ways—Stephen Toulmin calls it the “quest for certainty,” Charles Taylor calls it
“disembedding,” and Michael McKeon terms it “explicitation”—but all agree that something fundamental shifted in the western European mind, first at the elite level and then, gradually and as part and parcel of widespread political and social transformations, across a wider section of the populace.  

We can call it, as Taylor does elsewhere, reflexivity: the idea that mental states (beliefs, feelings, attitudes) are accompanied by their own construal, so that we take up a third-person perspective in relation to them.

Taylor describes this change in largely intellectual terms, but it plays out most significantly in institutional and historical settings. In England, the process of reflexivity did not reach its culmination until the events of 1688/89 and the installation of an official state policy that beliefs were things to be tolerated. After 1688, the Anglican Church became a player in a political field rather than a definer of that field. Though the bishops retained their traditional landed independence, they increasingly found themselves split along party lines and involved in current political debates.  

And though religion remained central to the nation’s identity, the increased attention to “religion” as an entity in itself pointed not to the political strength of the church but to its developing weakness. All political partisans, from Tories like Francis Atterbury to Whigs like Benjamin Hoadly, addressed the question of religion with a self-consciousness indicative of its new legal and conceptual footing; “religion” had become an object of attention, of debate, and of knowledge. From now on, it was a “matter to be defined, limited, or encouraged—by powers of another character.”

This need to be explicit about “religion” affected not only the church’s political fate but also its internal sense of itself. Whig centrist altered the look and feel of religion in England. Thanks to the Toleration Act, the government licensed 2,536 meetinghouses in the years between 1691 and 1710. The act also made it difficult for parish constables and churchwardens to enforce attendance, and the simple fact that on a given Sunday parishioners might choose to go to a different church—or, perhaps, not to go to church at all—helped to drive home the fact of religious diversity at an everyday level. Anglican clergy now had to face, as never before, the reality of religious competition. Freshly conscious of its audience, and of needing to persuade rather than coerce them, the church began to emphasize pastoral training, pastoral care, and the orthodoxy of the universities. This gave rise in turn to a different kind of religious expertise, what Mark Goldie calls “a new type of churchmanship which sought to seize the pastoral initiative” within a diversified religious landscape. As newspaper editors were discovering at
about the same time, authority took a different form once the concept of an 
audience began to matter.

Historians of the period have described a noticeable uptick in lay piety 
and an “astonishing market for devotional literature,” much of it based on 
the Book of Common Prayer. As the century progressed, the Methodist, 
Evangelical, and Sunday School movements absorbed and fostered much of 
this popular piety. Yet modern-day historians, like their eighteenth-century 
clerical counterparts, struggle to get an accurate picture of the religious land-
scape of the age. They can track print runs and sales figures, perhaps, and to 
a certain extent the numbers of bodies in the pews. But how were those 
 bodies spending their time away from church? And even in church, what 
were they thinking about? What did they believe? These questions achieved 
new visibility and new import in the aftermath of the Toleration Act, when 
English religion took on its distinctively modern character as something that 
people “have”—and thus what they might potentially lose. Defining it was 
hugely important, yet the new belief-based descriptions turned upon internal 
states that were impossible to verify. The potential gap between the position-
ing and disposal of the body (increasingly the domain of the state) and the 
contents of the mind (increasingly the domain of “religion”) thus created a 
new kind of conflict. We might say that the body was secularized in the sense 
that its needs, behaviors, and performances increasingly became the business 
of differentiated social spheres: the state, the economy, the medical profes-
sions, and so on.

Finally, although the epistemological turn may have made early modern 
religious belief more secure (less relational and less public, more cognitive 
and more private), it also created the new problem of other people’s beliefs. 
We might think of this as an international relations problem, in contrast to 
the national and pastoral problem of what was happening in local congrega-
tions. For if belief named a set of ideas that might be false rather than a 
participation in something tacitly known to be true, and beliefs became 
things that other people had, then it was a short step to understanding alterna-
tive beliefs as different religions, in the plural, to be ranged against the “true 
religion” (that is, Christianity). This suggests a methodology for handling 
the plethora of information that travelers and explorers were bringing back. 
The new science of religion could adopt a methodology like that of the 
natural sciences, making comparative religion possible for the first time. 
Newly equipped with qualities understood to belong properly to it, religion 
thus became an “outsider’s term,” part and parcel of a developing science of
religion designed to accord with the new natural sciences. A fourfold division of the world’s religions into Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Idolatry became the standard taxonomy.

When Purchas speaks of his “addiction” to history, the word anticipates all of these changes. To begin with, the shift toward cognitive definitions of religion accentuates a growing conflict between mind and body widely distributed across early modern intellectual culture. If addiction was once a discourse concerned with the ownership of the body, in the early modern period it became the site of a contest between mind and body: to be addicted was to be in thrall not to someone else but to one’s own body, and even more, to the weakness of one’s own will. Thus, although the automatic connection between addiction and drug use did not enter medical discourse until the early twentieth century, its possibility was circulating much earlier: the OED lists 1716 as the earliest mention of substance addiction in this sense, citing a doctor’s “too great Addiction to the Bottle”—a physical bondage that signifies a moral failure.

We can use this medical sense of addiction to open up another kind of reading as well: not just the developing conflict between mind and body, but the developing conflict between home and abroad, center and periphery, religion and religions—conflicts that can be mapped, though none too neatly, onto the mind/body opposition. As Nigel Leask and John Barrell have pointed out, opium use by romantic writers like Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey was a technology for delivering panoramic knowledge: exotic, well traveled, and powerful, but never separable from its material conditions. In “Kubla Khan,” a travel book carried into a dream generates a poem that cannot be written down because it is interrupted by business. That dialectic of unity and breakdown, of dreams and business, is central to the experience of opium, itself both commodity and conduit of a composite Orient. And if “Kubla Khan” is a celebration of the synthetic mind of the romantic artist/genius, able to grasp all at once the basic and underlying unity of the fragments of human experience, it also documents that fragmentation itself. Opium is a release from the world of business, and it is the world of business. No wonder that dynamic sometimes yielded not a visionary dream but a nightmare. As Coleridge himself put it in *The Pains of Sleep*,

The third night, when my own loud scream
Had waked me from the fiendish dream,
O’ercome with sufferings strange and wild,
I wept as I had been a child.30

The opium context of “Kubla Khan,” then, reminds us that long before the narcopolitics of our own moment, addiction was a global phenomenon. Beneath the poem’s superficial poetry versus business contrast is a deeper one, born of colonialism, travel, international finance, and the quest for certainty, or what Coleridge called “foundations,” in the midst of it all. “Addiction” names the anxieties and confusions of a modern subject before whom the world was opening up in frightening but intoxicating ways.

Religions Gone Global

I here bring Religion from Paradise to the Arke, and thence follow her round about the World, and (for her sake) observe the World it selfe, with the several Countries and peoples therein. (Purchas, “To the Reader”)

I stress this point because the presence of opium in “Kubla Khan” allegorizes something plotted more clearly by Purchas’s own book and the manner of its arrangement, with its own complex connections to the loss and recovery of autonomy, to sleeping, pleasure, and pain. The poem’s visionary or mythic character, that is to say, responds not only to the world of “business” but also to a central but little-noticed quality of Purchas’s own text: it was the first important English book to use the word “religions,” in the plural, in its title.

The book’s full title is this: Purchas His pilgrimage. Or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered, from the Creation unto This Present. If this title is not daunting enough, a glance at the table of contents immediately confirms how futile it would be to read the book straight through. Even the first and shortest edition of 1613 runs to 752 pages; the fourth edition of 1626 is “much enlarged with additions, and illustrated with mappes through the whole worke”—it is over 1,000 pages long.31 Perhaps such unrestrained growth is to be expected from an early seventeenth-century text that aims to describe “all ages and places discovered.”
Yet it is not merely the sheer size of Purchas’s undertaking that makes it such a daunting read. Purchas believed himself to be doing something new, “an enterprise never yet (to my knowledge) by any, in any language, attempted.”32 In pursuit of this ambition, the book’s lengthy subtitle concludes with a significant addendum: *With briefe descriptions of the countries, nations, states, discoveries, private and publike customes, and the most remarkable rarities of nature, or humane industrie, in the same.* “Religion,” Purchas assures the reader, “is my more proper aime.”33 Yet the subtitle promises nothing less than the whole world. Or rather, it promises “the world and the religions.” Although he is far from clear here, Purchas seems to mean that while religions, in the plural, can be analytically folded into culture (which he like most other seventeenth-century writers calls “customes”), religion, in the singular, cannot. True religion may involve the mind not the body, but it is for that very reason relatively inaccessible to the travel writer. Most of Purchas’s survey therefore betrays little interest in what the many denizens of the globe “believe.” Their various religions are largely indistinguishable from the detailed, indeed almost endless histories and contemporary cultural practices that Purchas calls, simply, “the world.” This world, in all its variety, is the addiction of Purchas’s leisure hours, while the true religion of Christianity remains his professional responsibility—his business. From this perspective, the opium dream of “Kubla Khan” simply follows Purchas’s own half realization that addiction and true religion, like leisure and business, pleasure and pain, arrive on the scene together.

For true religion needs propping up. Everywhere he turns, Purchas sees divine judgment against the sorry state of Western Christianity. His account of Mohammed, for instance, stresses the schisms that afflicted Christianity, the “Soule thereof being . . . torne and rent by the Sects and Heresies of the Arrians, Donatists, Nestorians, Pelagians, and others” (202). The rise of Islam is consequently a “secret and just judgement of GOD” (193). And Purchas is less than impressed with “not-preaching Ministers, especially in Countrie-villages” who “onely read the service, and never studie for more.” “[E]ven the Heathen shall rise up in judgment against them,” he writes, for his literary pilgrimage shows that most of the world’s religions involve the doing of many things.34 In the passage that Coleridge was supposedly reading when he fell asleep, for example, Purchas reports that Cublai Can owns 10,000 horses, “as white as snow.” “According to the direction of his Astrologers or Magicians, he . . . spendeth and powreth forth with his owne hands the Milke of these Mares in the Aire, and on the Earth, to give drinke to the spirits and Idols
which they worship’’ (350). Perhaps the spectacle of these bizarre “customes” taking place elsewhere will inspire the sleeping guardians of the true religion at home: “Likewise our Ministers may bee incited unto all godly labours in their function of preaching the Gospell, seeing [as] otherwise, for outward and bodily ceremonies, the Turkes and Jewes in their manifold devotions . . . would convince us of Idlenesse” (2). “I subscribe with hand and practise to our Liturgie, but not to such Lethargie,” he concludes (2).

Thus does Samuel Purchas confront, and half realize, the degree to which true religion requires religions. His title pages, in their almost endless taxonomy and their range from Asia to Africa to the Americas, implicitly come to terms with this new historical reality. Like almost all of his contemporaries, Purchas finds that atheism is unnatural and religion ubiquitous. Religion is “the soule of the world,” the “law of Nature having written in the practice of all men (as we here in the particulars doe shew) the profession of some Religion.”35 And to acknowledge that there are many religions in the world, rather than simply a taxonomy of heresies, paradoxically enough makes it possible to distinguish the true religion from all the others on offer. However fleetingly, then, Purchas entertains the possibility that true religion has something to learn from the fact that religion is everywhere. The care of one’s internal state, the real genius of Protestant Christianity and the soul of true religion, needs a prod from the global cultures within which it suddenly finds itself situated. As Purchas seems to recognize but cannot quite say, addiction is true religion’s other—its disavowed but necessary condition in the new global marketplace of religion.

Delight

We are now in a position to mount another kind of defense of the visionary mode of “Kubla Khan,” one that depends not on its synthetic power but on the remarkable historical facts that Purchas registers almost without noticing them: that religion, however Christian a category, is also a worldly phenomenon; that it becomes an object of analysis at a moment of global consciousness that can be found more or less across the board in seventeenth-century Europe; that despite the culturalist insight that jump-starts German biblical criticism, the “enabling milieu” that makes a people and a religion was never limited to the nation.36
Here is where the poem’s own account of things can help us. Its two primary geographic sites, China and Abyssinia, are not really susceptible to the kind of imaginative syncretism that Shaffer hopes to find. As Nigel Leask demonstrates in an important essay, English radicals of the 1790s associated Kubla’s Chinese garden with the corruptions and imperial arrogance of the ancien régime. By contrast, Abyssinia (the origin of the poem’s “maid” and her visionary song) had long denoted an ancient and uncorrupted Christian culture. The Mount Abora of which Coleridge’s maid sings is Mount Amara, fabled home of the Ethiopian kings and possible seat of Prester John, the mythical Christian king of the East. The idea that the maid’s song is the means for a visionary rebuilding of Kubla’s dome ignores this important distinction between old corruption and primitive purity—a distinction that would have mattered very much to Coleridge in 1797, even if he downplayed it by the time of the poem’s eventual 1816 publication.

As befits a fantasy of a truly global Christianity, accounts of Prester John vary widely. Many of the sources Purchas had available to him, however, converge on the general idea that Prester John was part of a dynasty of Asian kings who converted to Christianity and ruled over huge sections of India and China until the Tartars drove them into Africa, where they eventually retreated to the hills of Amara in Ethiopia and were henceforth falsely believed to be African. Although he is clearly nervous about disagreeing with this narrative, Purchas nevertheless offers a different and more skeptical account. Considering the many texts arrayed before him, he remarks that “such a multitude of Fables could not but have some truth for their ground” (560). He suggests that there must have been several Johns, Christian kings of varying powers, ruling over different parts of the globe at different periods. The confusion of names and languages, and the migration of peoples between India, Egypt, and Ethiopia, have caused even careful historians to group all these into one vast Christian kingdom of the East.

As Purchas sifts laboriously through the sources, analyzes the reports, and weighs the evidence, the figure of Prester John, and thus by extension the possibility of a Christianity both pure and universal, becomes more and more bookish. The invention of “religions” may very well be, as some have argued, a “projection of Christian disunity onto the world,” but already here one senses the beginnings of the “solution” to this disunity in the remarkable wealth of the textual record to which Purchas had, at the beginning of his own book, confessed his addiction. We are deep in a library rather than deep in someone’s imagination.
The textuality at the heart of his account becomes clear when Purchas in fact turns to the remarkable library, larger than that at either Constantinople or Alexandria, that Amara is said to house. “There are three great Halls, each above two hundred paces large, with Bookes of all Sciences, written in fine parchment, with much curiositie of golden letters, and other workes, and cost in the writing, binding, and covers: some on the floore, some on shelves about the sides.” Among these books are the lost writings of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Solomon, and Job, and a variety of gospels “ascribed to Bartholomew, Thomas, Andrew, and many others,” writings of the Queen of Sheba, the Greek Fathers, texts from “Syria, Egypt, Africa, and the Latine Fathers translated, with others innumerable in the Greeke, Hebrew, Arabike, Abissine, Egyptian, Syrian, Chaldee, . . . Saint Augustines workes are in Arabike: Poets, Philosophers, Physicians, Rabbinis, Talmudists, Cabalists, Hierogliphikes, and others [who] would be too tedious to relate” (567). The account, greatly abbreviated here, speaks for itself. In this fantasy library are all the books relevant to Christianity as a world religion, in conversation and conflict with Judaism and Islam. Remarkably, the knowledge continues to flow in: “When Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus; when the Saracens over-ranne the Christian world; many Bookes were conveyed out of the Easterne parts into Ethiopia; when Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jewes out of Spaine, many of them entered into Ethiopia, and . . . enriched the . . . Library with their books.”42 Everywhere Purchas turns, books are on the move. Amara is so beautiful that some have mistaken it for paradise, but when Purchas imagines an earthly paradise, he imagines room after room of books. Those volumes do not all say the same thing—indeed, they say many different things, but that matters less than the sublime experience of being in the presence of texts that flow endlessly like waters: “It is a Sea, that every yeare receiveth new rivers, never running out” (567).

Faced with this textual flood, Coleridge had described himself in the Biographia as floating, searching in vain for a solid foundation for “religion and morals” on which to rest. “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,” he writes (258). Purchas, by contrast, seems at home on the sea, and thrilled to be floating on a sublime tide of manuscripts. Unlike Coleridge’s established church, a now ineffective “bulwark” of toleration against the rising waters of textual criticism, Purchas needs no barrier: his fantastic library will expand infinitely, absorbing all in a gesture that the speaker in “Kubla Khan” calls “deep delight”:
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song
To such deep delight 'twould win me
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice! (lines 42–47)

“Kubla Khan” thus grasps as an opportunity one of the stranger aspects of Purchas’s text: it is a travel book written by a man who never traveled but simply read a lot of books. This banal fact tells us something about what it means to say that an abstraction like “religion” gets invented at a particular historical juncture. Inventions require a medium, and they require a technology. For Purchas, the book is the medium, and addiction is the technology. The result is what Purchas labels “pleasure” and Coleridge terms “delight,” an affect that for both men involves a complex alchemy of addiction by which pain becomes joy. What the poem names as the “ancestral voices prophesying war” have not been banished from this delight—indeed, some of the books of which Purchas dreams arrive only because of conflict. But the meaning of “war” has shifted. This is not the clash of civilizations, nor a religious conflict against which established institutions must throw up a hasty embankment of toleration. Nor is it an imaginative or visionary overcoming of conflict in the name of an underlying and heretofore hidden universalism. It is rather, as Purchas says on his title page, “the world and the religions.” For to “sing of Mount Abora” with the maid is to sing of books, to sing of a textual paradise. Long before anyone thought to put it in such terms, religion is a media event. This is not a theory of religion, of the kind on offer in Germany. Nor is it a critique of religion, of the kind on offer in France. Nor is it, again, an attempt to manage religion, of the kind on offer in England after 1688. It is rather a reminder that the history of religion is also the history of the things that are not religion—which to say, the history of the world.

Weaving the Circle

John Locke owned a copy of Purchas His Pilgrimes, the follow-up volume to the Pilgrimage. And though he complained of its length, he also found it useful. It was a point of pride for Locke that his political principles were based not on theory but on empirical evidence; this was the basis of his attack
not just on Filmer’s patriarchal theory but on Lord Herbert’s deist argument for the universality of religious experience. Herbert’s *De Religione Laici* (1645) had grounded its universalism in faculty psychology; the claim “‘That there is one Supreme God . . . [who] ought to be worshipped’ dominated the deist debates until the 1680s. Locke’s attack on this idea is a winsome one. In the first book of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he has great fun listing all the nations and cultures he can think of where atheism is the order of the day, and makes much too of the fact that “Men have far different, nay, often contrary and inconsistent Ideas” about God. Although religion is clearly spread all over the world, then, Locke claims that the empirical evidence cannot support the deist’s argument that we all share an innate sense of the divine. The diversity is just too great, as Purchas himself had demonstrated at such length.

When Locke began to formulate toleration as a theoretical program in its own right, then, it was natural that he start with the premise that because salvation was a personal matter, no human being should dictate its forms to another. The sheer fact of the world’s diversity made any other position the height of arrogance. That this seems so uncontroversial now is a testament to Locke’s influence, for at the time it was a remarkable place to begin, even despite the widespread circulation of travel narratives in the seventeenth century. After Locke, conceptually at least, it became possible to detach “religion” from political and social structures, and make it an object in its own right—a matter, in particular, for each person to meditate on in private. “[T]he care of each man’s Soul, and of the things of Heaven,” as Locke put it, “is left entirely to every man’s self.” In the vision of the world laid out in the first *Letter Concerning Toleration*, the state cannot coerce religious belief, but neither can the church. Locke, that is to say, helped to articulate what would eventually become known as political liberalism: for him, individuals were bearers of rights (freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom to own property), and the role of the state was to foster and—up to a point—protect those rights by drawing a line around them. By limiting its remit to the care of souls, the discourse of toleration thus makes religion political in a new way: it becomes a delimited object existing within the larger realm of the polity. In order to distinguish religion from the state, moreover, the state must know what religion was: toleration thus entailed the thorny issue of defining the thing that it would tolerate. In a remarkable and influential move, Locke thus took the empirical evidence of religion’s varied distribution
across the globe and turned it into a reason for detaching it from the world and installing it in the conscience of the individual, its true and only home.

That particular solution, what we might describe as an *unworlding* of religion, is alive and well today. Thus Jürgen Habermas, in a well-known 2006 essay entitled “Religion in the Public Sphere,” comes to terms with the continuing salience of religion simply by making it unknowable. Like many of our leading public intellectuals, Habermas had long argued that the Enlightenment made religion culturally superfluous. His 2006 essay was notable, then, because it marked a shift in his thinking, and set the parameters for his ongoing effort to grapple with what world events were clearly revealing as the inadequacy of his earlier analysis. Habermas’s essay takes itself to be sympathetic to the needs of religious citizens, particularly their presumed sense of loss or displacement in the modern world. And in a number of ways the essay is remarkable and even moving. Most striking, however, is that Habermas reproduces the very terms that made religion such a problem for the liberal tradition in the first place. He insists on seeing “religious citizens” not only as a monolithic category but as an unworldly one, enclosed in a sphere of their own making. The problem for liberal democracies, accordingly, is how to accommodate “them” without compromising core democratic principles. What seems unimaginable to Habermas, just as it seemed unimaginable to Locke, is a religion that is also, essentially and legitimately, a part of our shared world.

Near the end of his essay, Habermas produces a striking description. “At best,” he writes, “philosophy circles the opaque core of religious experience when reflecting on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core must remain so abysmally alien to discursive thought as does the core of aesthetic experience, which can likewise only be circled but not penetrated by philosophical reflection.” A potent force, resistant to explanation and opaque to its core, religion, like the aesthetic, turns in on itself. All we can do is draw a line around it, and say, in effect, “There it is; it cannot be penetrated.” Lines demarcate, and sometimes protect; they also contain and limit, and produce an object where before there may have been a more fluid set of relations. The gendered nature of this description scarcely requires comment, but it bears thinking about in the context of Coleridge’s fantasized Abyssinian maid, playing and singing of Amara. For I have argued in this chapter for a different way of picturing the relation of religion and the public sphere—one rooted in Abora/Amara and its library, one less alien than simply mediated, worldly,
and on occasion surprisingly delightful: not a line in the sand but a voyage on the sea.

The poem ends, though, not with the hopeful image of the singing maid and her library but with a visionary poet, circled round by fearful and uncomprehending voices that seem to come from elsewhere:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (lines 49–54)

This is a public sphere organized by its incomprehension of the abyssal being in its midst. The unworlding of religion wins the day, at least in this poem. For though the poet may be singing of books, what the public sees is something else: opaque, holy, flashing, dangerous.