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The Voice of One Crying in a Wilderness of Error:
William Blake's Role as English Prophet

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William Blake's Role as English Prophet

William Blake's radically revisionist perception of the Bible led him to denounce orthodox religion. For Blake, the ancient prophets were nothing less than masters of Poetic Genius and believed their unadulterated imaginative visions, not the rigid rules of orthodoxy, to be the true source of religion. To save the Poetic Genius conceptually from the abuse of established religion, Blake formulated his theory of Contraries, which unites "Heaven" and "Hell," human Reason and Energy. But salvation, at this belated time, can be only conceptual. That is, man in his fallen state has limited perceptions and cannot recognize that religion is a system to control him. Unless he understands Contraries and embraces his imagination, he will be blind to the fact that religion enslaves rather than fosters spirituality and a relationship with the divine—what Blake calls the "Infinite."

Any discussion of Blake and religion must begin with his definition of what religion truly is, as opposed to the established version. For Blake, religious belief comes from the Poetic Genius, or the imagination, as defined in *All Religions are One* (ca. 1788; Blake, *Complete* 77).¹ For the "Ancients," or biblical prophets, an "Angel & Spirit & Demon" was derived from the Poetic Genius. Since "there shall no man see [God], and

live" (Exodus 33:20), the Poetic Genius is essential for receiving and perceiving divine truth. In the second "Memorable Fancy" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1793), Isaiah—while he and Ezekiel dine with Blake—explains that, during his time as prophet for Israel, "I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing" (Plate 12, ll. 6-8).² Because the senses alone can only perceive the "finite" and "organical," he could only learn the things of God by allowing his imagination to guide his human senses. Furthermore, the Poetic Genius is the "true Man" (*All Religions* 77) and the material portion, or Body, as well as all forms, are derived only from the Poetic Genius. In other words, the Poetic Genius from which religion stems is the spirituality of man, and the different religions of different nations show how each has received the Poetic Genius.

Ezekiel, the most imaginative of the major prophets (Damon 134), explains the role of the Poetic Genius in the structure of the Jewish faith: "we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius...was the first principle and all the others merely derivative" (*Marriage* 12, 21). Any other form of spirituality or worship that was not practiced principally through the use of the Poetic Genius, the Jews "despised" (12, 22). The prophets of Israel warned the people of these false beliefs, and to make sure the people were not enticed by other forms of worship, the

prophets reminded them that other religious practices were nothing new, "prophecyng that all Gods would at last be proved to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius" (12, 23 - 13, 2). It was a purity and unadulterated quality of divine communication that the prophets wanted the people to value. Furthermore, since Israel was the first to teach the use of the Poetic Genius, its religion was the true one. If the people strayed from recognizing their Poetic Genius, they also strayed from the true religion and the true God. Thus, for Blake, poets, including Israel's prophets, are the true producers of religion.

Blake's attribution of religion to the Poetic Genius is also clear from his refutation of the ideas of John Locke in *There is No Natural Religion* (ca. 1788; 75-76), which dates from the same time as *All Religions are One*. For Blake, Locke believes that man can perceive only by way of his five senses and cannot "naturally Percieve" anything through an imagination. He can have new or different ideas only by reasoning on what perceptions he already has. By this logic, Blake says, man would soon be "at the ratio of all things," unable to discover anything more. In other words, in forming new ideas, man's rational capabilities—"the Philosophic & Experimental"—would soon exhaust the perceptions that his senses are able to acquire and stall him at a glass ceiling of knowledge. Blake further

refutes Locke's ideas by saying, "the ratio of all we have already known. is not the same that it shall be when we know more," and for Blake, knowing more is inevitable. Locke, he says, also believes that "none can desire what he has not perciev'd." But Blake responds by saying that man's desire is "Infinite." If he uses his Poetic Genius to achieve what he desires, his "possession is Infinite," and so is he himself. Blake's "Application" of this fact—"He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only"—continues the link between the poet and religion, but with the added point that if one is to gain spiritual awareness to transcend his physical existence and acquire more than human wisdom, he must use his imagination and recognize his Poetic Genius. Here Blake explicitly links poetry with religion by defining the Poetic Genius as "the Poetic or Prophetic" (*italics mine*). In this way, the Poetic Genius, which is responsible for religion, is also responsible for prophecy, because through it, man communicates directly with the divine, as did the ancient prophets of Israel.

The system of beliefs that makes up orthodox religion, however, consists of the words of the prophets perverted by priests for their own selfish purposes. They have made rigid rules out of the prophets' imaginative discoveries so that, by stifling man's Poetic Genius, they can rule over him. Blake

explains how this came about in the opening "Argument" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Orthodox religion was attracted to the miracles told by the ancient prophets. One such miracle occurred when Moses struck the "cliff" with his rod and water poured out as "a river, and a spring" (2, 10-11); another, when Adam was created from "Red clay" (2, 13). The "ancient Poets" described these miracles with "whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive" (11, 1-5). Then "a system was formed," namely "Priesthood," and orthodox religion "enslav'd" man by "Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales," or the writings of these prophets (11, 8-12). By the priests' saying that "the Gods had orderd" (11, 13-14) these imaginative visions of the prophets to take place, "men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (11, 15) in the name of the Poetic Genius. Because of the lies of orthodox religion and the bound perceptions of his fallen state, man cannot perceive that his own Poetic Genius, or imagination, is the seat of his spirituality. Man forgot that he himself had been formed from a deity, Urizen—what the Bible calls being "created...in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27).

In *The Book of Urizen*, Blake dramatizes the creation and the fall of man. The Bible, which *The Book of Urizen* parodies, states that "in the beginning" there was only God, and then—out of nothing—He created the physical world. But in Blake's

account, Urizen exists with and as a part of the Eternals who occupy Eternity. Therefore, the creation of *his* world, and even his own identity, is necessarily a division—a division from Eternity. "The so-called 'creation' by Urizen," as John Beer points out, "is merely a process of drawing away from eternity and vision in order that matter may be created into forms of solidity and permanence" (78).

In fact, the creation of the physical earth is a side effect of the more momentous event of Urizen's separation. When Urizen seeks to bring Eternity under one Law, the Eternals (perhaps seeing its detrimental outcome with their visionary energy that Urizen has now rejected) become angry ("Rage siez'd the strong" [4, 44]). In order to protect himself from the fury of the Eternals, Urizen "dug mountains & hills in vast strength, / He piled them in incessant labour" (5, 22-23), and afterwards, "The vast world of Urizen appear'd" (5, 37). Thus, Urizen's separation from the Eternals led to the creation of the physical world.

Urizen's act not only involves a division from the Eternals but a division of himself. All immortal Eternals, including Urizen, possess both Reason and Energy, and in Eternity, these co-exist in a state of flux, depending upon one another. Thus, when Urizen "[tries] to establish permanently the values of Eternity" (Beer 81), he must reject his Energy ("First I fought

with the fire" [4, 14]). This separate entity of Energy is named Los.

When fixing these values of Eternity, Urizen forms his Law so that they exist in dualities; thus, everything is given one value or its opposite. Furthermore, Urizen defines himself (Reason) as "good" and his polar opposite, Los (Energy), as "evil." This duality is clear in the language of the poem: Urizen, the good, is able to form his law of "peace," "love," and "unity" (4, 34) by fighting the "fire" of Energy which he says manifests "terrible monsters Sin-bred" (4, 28).

Urizen's creation results in much more than the formation of the earth. Los now becomes a creative power as well, reacting to the events and emotions caused by Urizen's separation. His situation is indeed bleak: not only was Urizen "rent from his side" "in anguish" (6, 3-4) but he now finds himself in a "dismal stupor" (7, 1), because in losing Urizen, he has in a way "lost his Mind" (Ostriker 916). Los is "affrighted / At the formless unmeasurable death" (7, 8-9) and seeks to give a form to the "direful changes" (7, 6) Urizen is undergoing after his separation. But Los's creation is not restricted to Urizen. As Beer explains, "Such is the mutual interexistence in Eternity that in giving form to Urizen, Los is actually creating a form for himself" (83).

Once Los finishes the task of creating a form for Urizen (and himself), he sees that, although it has organized the chaos, it has not reunited them with the other Eternals. He realizes that "now his eternal life / Like a dream was obliterated" (14, 33-34). Subsequently, "Los wept obscur'd with mourning... He saw Urizen deadly black, / In his chains bound, & Pity began" (14, 48-51). Because "pity divides the soul" (14, 53), Los then divides, and from "the globe of life blood trembling" (15, 13) that results, Enitharmon is formed. In addition, Beer explains, "The greatest horror for Los lies in the fact that in giving form to Urizen and himself, he has totally destroyed their freedom" and "assistance could come only from a division of the soul, painfully, towards a new creation" (84). Thus, Los further carries out his redemptive role in providing a savior in Enitharmon. The significance here is that Urizen's creation leads to more creation and change, not to the permanence he wished.

This creation leads to the fall of man. In fact, for Blake, the creation of man and his fall are the same event, although the Bible itself describes this fall as the result of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit *after* the creation. One quality of man in the fallen state is that his perception is bound to only what the five senses perceive. The five senses are created by Los when he forms a physical body for Urizen and

"since division is fall, Urizen's fall is Los's fall, too"
 (Marks 584). So Los also possesses this physical body with its
 limited perceptions. He then passes these limitations on to the
 entities that spring from him: Enitharmon, Orc, and the
 "enormous race" (22, 45) who possess "the limited human body as
 we know it" (Beer 83).

The Eternals watching all this, have grown less and less
 tolerant. Finally, when Enitharmon is begotten from Los, "All
 Eternity shudderd at sight / Of the first female now separate"
 (18, 9-10). The Eternals began to "'Spread a Tent... That
 Eternals may no more behold them'" (19, 2-4). Just when Orc was
 born "The Eternals, closed the tent... No more Los beheld
 Eternity" (19, 47 - 20, 2). Once Los and his offspring lose
 contact with Eternity, their "Senses inward rush'd shrinking"
 (27, 29). Eventually they "forgot their [former] eternal life"
 (27, 42) and were "bound down / To earth by their narrowing
 perceptions" (27, 46-47). Thus, because of creation, humans are
 eventually permanently separated from the universal truth of
 which the Eternals are guardians.

The ultimate result of creation, for Blake, is the
 formation of "a fixed order in a fallen world" (Marks 581), or
 Religion, the "product of reason mingled with pity" (Beer 86).
 As Urizen surveys the human beings whose existence he is
 responsible for, "he wept, & he called it Pity / And his tears

flowed down on the winds" (25, 3-4). The shadowy web that he trails after him in his wanderings is called "The Net of Religion" (25, 22): "From the sorrows of Urizens soul / And the Web" (25, 17-18) comes the original religion. It proves to be truly debilitating for the human race. Because of the "woven hipocrisy" of the Net of Religion, the "streaky slime in their heavens...Appeard transparent air" (25, 32-35). Thus, besides the narrowed perceptions of humans, Religion is another reason why humans cannot discover the truth of Eternity. Furthermore, "None could break the Web, no wings of fire" (25, 19). In other words, the imaginative powers of Energy, represented by fire, cannot completely overthrow this systematic oppressor.

At this point, Blake's idea of Contraries can be introduced as a remedy for the damage inflicted by orthodox religion. In Plate 3 of *The Marriage*, Blake begins with his main thesis: "Without Contraries is no progression," because both "Reason and Energy" are "necessary to Human existence" (7-9). He moves on to summarize, with his own vocabulary, orthodox religious beliefs:

From these contraries spring what the religious call
 Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason.
 Evil is the active springing from Energy.
 Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.
 (10-13)

This passage must be discussed alongside Emanuel Swedenborg's views because here Blake blatantly attacks him. According to G.

R. Sabri-Tabrizi, "*The Marriage* is written in opposition to Swedenborg's doctrine of predestination" (89). Thus, as Martin K. Nurmi explains, "Blake merely adopts the terms 'Heaven' and 'Hell' and uses them ironically to show that they are meaningless as the orthodox intend them and they actually do not designate real moral qualities at all" (25). In fact, this entire passage is "an ironic summary of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*" (Sabri-Tabrizi 98).

Blake's concept of Contraries first appeared in his marginalia in Swedenborg's *Angelic Wisdom Concerning the Divine Love and the Divine Wisdom* (ca. 1789). In his work, Swedenborg says that man should believe "that all good of life is from the action of god, and all evil of life from the reaction of man, so far his reaction comes to be from [God's] action, and man acts with God as if from himself" (32-33). Blake summarizes: "Good & Evil are here both Good & the two contraries Married" (*Writings* 1392). From this, Sabri-Tabrizi explains that "'Good' and 'Evil' are the product of passive reasoning," and the passive and active forces of Reason and Energy, respectively, are "married," combining "the spiritual and material world" to form one entity (98).

This entity is further explained in Plate 4 of *The Marriage*, where Blake discusses the Body and the Soul. Because orthodox religion has formed rigid "sacred codes" (1) from the

writings of the prophets, they have been the cause of "Errors" (2) concerning the nature of Body and Soul and Good and Evil. For orthodox religion, the Body and Soul are two separate entities and "That Energy. calld Evil. is alone from the Body. & that Reason. calld Good. is alone from the Soul" (5-6). This means that the Energy of man's sinful tendencies results from the weakness of the flesh through inherited sin from Adam, and thus, this Energy should be viewed as Evil. But if man Reasons on religious teachings and then suppresses his own sinful thoughts, this is Good because it will purify his Soul. For Blake these principles are exactly wrong. The Body is not "distinct from his Soul" because the "Body is a portion of Soul discernd by the five Senses" (10-12). Because Body, that portion which houses the senses, and Soul, by which man understands the Infinite, are for Blake one entity, this definition of them as opposites, Evil and Good, cannot hold true. The Body/Soul cannot be classified as Good or Evil; it just is. Dan Miller explains that when Blake speaks of the Body, he is not referring to the "fallen body" that orthodox religion speaks of but "the human form that, if 'the doors of perception were cleansed,' would appear as 'infinite' as the soul" (497). The Soul is the part of man that Blake speaks of in *There is No Natural Religion* when he says that man "percieves more than sense...can discover."

If Body and Soul are of the same entity, so must Energy and Reason be indivisible. Blake rejects the value judgments that orthodox religion makes of them: "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy" (4, 13-14). Miller explains that just as a figure needs an outline, so Energy needs Reason; "neither is possible without the other" (498). Thus, in this relationship Reason, the "outward circumference," is merely the five senses creating a boundary for the "energetic interior," or the figure of the Body (Miller 497).

Whereas Blake believes this boundary of Reason is not and should not be restrictive, orthodox religion teaches that it necessarily must be. Otherwise, "God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies" (4, 7-8). Blake uses this teaching of orthodox religion to explain the tyranny of the priests over the common man and superbly symbolizes it in "The Garden of Love" from *Songs of Experience* (1794). Man easily embraces his Energy in the Garden of Love where he can "play on the green," freely expressing his desires. On one crucial occasion the narrator of the poem, arguably Blake himself, goes to the Garden and finds "A Chapel was built in the midst," symbolizing the occupation of the Poetic Genius's authority by orthodox religion when it should be reserved for the poets and prophets who use it correctly. Religion has indeed restricted

man's Energy because "the gates of the Chapel were shut, / And Thou shalt not. writ over the door." Interestingly, Blake places a period after the phrase, "Thou shalt not" signifying that the laws of orthodox religion are fixed and unchangeable, and ignore the fact that "Without Contraries is no progression." Blake then turns from the Chapel to seek comfort in the garden. He finds it corrupted completely. There "Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds," keeping constant watch that they stay in control of mankind. In order to maintain this control, they occupy the site of freedom—the green—and dictate what happens there. Metaphorically, they usurp the domain of the imagination and define happiness themselves. The physical and the metaphorical images are combined when Blake finds them "binding with briars, my joys & desires." David E. James further explains Blake's view: "The very notion of...a religion which allows mortification of the body as a means to spiritual redemption, is exposed as ideologically complicit in priestcraft's perpetuation of tyrannical social institutions" (244). Also, by restricting man's Energy with Reason, orthodox religion can suppress any imaginative ideas man may use to refute the priests, and thus, orthodox religion can remain in control.

As a separate lyric in *Songs of Experience*, "The Garden of Love" provides a chance to personalize, not just to

philosophize, Blake's radical distrust of organized religion. The poem is in first person, and it contrasts present to past. Its speaker goes to the Garden but on the way there "saw what I never had seen" (2). He must have passed this way many times before if he recognized something new: "A Chapel was built in the midst, / Where I used to play on the green" (3-4). He reaches the Chapel first because he describes its closed gate before he "turn'd to the Garden of Love" (7). So the speaker appears to be walking such that he comes to the Chapel before he reaches the Garden. It is evident he has made this journey to the Garden before also because he knows the Garden is one that, in the past, "so many sweet flowers bore" (8).

These first two stanzas describe a progression. The speaker journeys toward the Garden but first passes the green where the Chapel is built. This suggests the journey of a human life from the "green" of childhood to the sexual maturity of the Garden of Love but also from the innocence of a child experiencing God through his creation—nature—by playing on the green to the realization of God's love through a "cultivated" relationship with Him which bears "sweet" rewards, indicated by flowers. Through the same imagery, Blake follows both the physical and spiritual growth of a human and shows that these two aspects of life are and should be inseparable.

The individual focus of the poem continues with the involvement of the speaker's own feelings and the heightening of his emotions. At the outset, the speaker is neutral about his journey, simply saying, "I went to the Garden of Love." But once he sees that religion has taken over this property which he held so dear, his journey becomes more meaningful and so his actions become more deliberate: "I turn'd to the Garden of Love." The most prominent emotion in the poem is anxiety, conveyed through the repetition of the word "And" at the beginning of over half of the poem's lines. This anxiety increases, not steadily, but exponentially; the number of lines beginning with "And" doubles with each stanza, until all four lines of the last begin with this word. The continual expectation that this language creates lends itself to fear with each new disappointment. Not only do these emotions intensify but they become darker, progressing from expectation to anxiety to fear.

This highly emotional response to the appearance of the Chapel makes the speaker's disappointment when seeing the Garden even more deeply felt. His relationship with God has been destroyed because the site where this relationship was experienced—the Garden—has been destroyed: "And I saw it was filled with graves, / And tomb-stones where flowers should be" (9-10). In the final line, the expectation is fulfilled and the

fear is realized: "And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds, / And binding with briars, my joys & desires" (11-12).

The speaker fails because he allows his relationship with God to be identified with the external rather than the internal. In the past, when he experienced the divine, he needed nothing but himself. Nature was the only physical surroundings, but his mistake was in identifying his relationship with God with these grounds. In gaining experience, which this poem tracks, he should have learned to have this relationship without even this small amount of external presence. Now when he sees the Chapel, however, he allows himself to be drawn to it—close enough to read the words over the door. From this point on, the speaker becomes less aware of his own feelings and reflections and more concerned with what he sees before him. He observes the priests very closely—he notices the color and style of their clothing—and watches them for an extended amount of time, seeing that they are not just walking but performing "their rounds."

The speaker's most crucial mistake is externalizing his "joys & desires" because then the priests are able to bind them. If he views his emotions as outside of himself, he is not using his imagination to experience them (because the imagination is, by definition, personal and unique to each individual and operates as such). Thus, it is not the imagination that fails

the man but the man who neglects his imagination. The speaker, originally free and playful, is enticed by the outward appearance of religion, symbolized by the Chapel, and then is drawn in until the "graves," "tomb-stones," and "Priests in black gowns" of orthodox religion take the place of and perform the same function as the imagination. Instead of personally experiencing God through his imagination, he allows religion—an external source—to furnish his thoughts and beliefs.

This poem is an important lesson about the individual's response to religion. In the works previously examined above, Blake outlines the destruction religion has caused to man as a race and puts forth solutions to heal, not himself, but his society. In "The Garden of Love," he instructs the individual man to hold fast to his own imagination by revealing to him the grim consequences if he does not.

Interestingly, in "The Garden of Love," the external things that replace the internal things of the imagination are "graves" and "tomb-stones." Through this imagery, Blake shows how religion uses doctrines about death to retain power over people. In *The Book of Urizen*, death was only introduced to mankind after religion was formed. Before Urizen's separation, death did not exist in Eternity. Indeed, when it comes into existence, the Eternals do not even know how to describe it ("The Eternals said: What is this?" [6, 9]) because it is so

different from the free-flowing Energy of their own existence. By describing Urizen as "Death...a clod of clay" (6, 9-10), it is apparent, Mollyanne Marks says, that Blake was aware "of the mortality implicit in any fallen act of creation" (587). Thus, Religion, the result of one of these acts of creation, necessarily incorporates the concept of death.

Once Urizen sees that "no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment" and that "life liv'd upon death" (23, 25-27), he turns the situation around to meet his own needs. He "teaches men the fear of death" (Deen 66). Religion fosters the fear Urizen institutes by teaching doctrines of hellfire and purgatory in order to exact devotion to the church that its followers may be spared of this suffering. As a result, "Urizen and his worshippers form a...tyrannical church" (Deen 67). Beginning in the eighth century, "the liturgy stressed praying for purification from purgatory and deliverance from hell" (Cohn-Sherbok 34). This is in opposition to "A number of biblical passages [that] indicate that after death human beings dwell in a netherworld known by various names (such as She'ol)" (Cohn-Sherbok 34), because in this place "the dead know not any thing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). According to scripture, the religious doctrines about the afterlife are false: "the thought of an immortality of the soul...is as alien to the NT as it is to the OT" (Schoberth 782).

Blake dramatizes the relationship between imaginative mankind and oppressive religious leaders by introducing the Prolific and the Devourer. In Plate 16 and 17 of *The Marriage*, Blake describes how the Prolific, the body of poets and prophets, is enslaved and restrained by the Devourer, orthodox religion. Here Blake speaks of a sort of triumph by the Prolific: "to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so" (16, 8-9). This enslavement is only an illusion because the Devourer "takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole" (16, 9-10). But here Blake introduces the condition that "the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea recieved the excess of his delights" (16, 11-12). In other words, if orthodox religion, as a system, suddenly embraced its Energy, the religion of the imagination produced by poets and prophets, who constantly resist Reason, would no longer be effective in creating 'delight' for mankind. This is why the religion of the Poetic Genius must not be reduced to a system of laws and "sacred codes":

These two classes of men are always upon earth, &
They should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile
Them seeks to destroy existence.

Religion is an endeavour to reconcile the two.

(16, 15-16 - 17, 1-3)

Because the Prolific and the Devourer will always be upon the earth but must not be reconciled, this "coexistence forms the

occasion for an imbalance" (Miller 499). Orthodox religion has seized this "occasion" to rule over the Poetic Genius in man. As Miller puts it, "Religion separates what cannot be separated [Energy and Reason, Good and Evil] in order to reconcile what cannot be reconciled [the Prolific and the Devourer]" (500).

To illustrate further how orthodox religion has strayed from original prophetic truth, Blake introduces the role of Jesus Christ who "did not wish to unite but to separate them, as in the Parable of sheep and goats! & he says I came not to send Peace but a Sword" (17, 4-6). The "Parable of sheep and goats" refers to Jesus Christ's definition of those who would accept his message and uphold it as "sheep" and those who would reject it or misuse it as "goats." Jesus's meaning here was clear to his listeners, who knew that "Syrian sheep were usually white and Syrian goats were usually black" and could conclude that "some souls are seen to be white and others black" (Buttrick 255). Just as a shepherd could divide them easily, Christ will see to it that "With the same sureness will the separation proceed among mankind" (Buttrick 255).

Blake further defines "sheep" as the poets and prophets who accept the imaginative visions of "the infinite in every thing" as did Isaiah and Ezekiel. In turn, the "goats" are the priests of orthodox religion who misuse the writings of the prophets. When Blake speaks of the "sword" that Jesus Christ came to send,

he was referring to Matthew 10:34-36, where Jesus says, "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother..And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Thus, people will be divided and classified by the way they respond to Jesus's message, if they follow him faithfully or if they twist his message to suit how they want to act. This division does not concern only those within a household but all humans. In Matthew 25:32-33, "before him shall be gathered all nations" and from these he will make the division. Thus, his message is like a sword that goes "out of his mouth" with which he will "smite the nations" in order to separate these two classes (Revelation 19:15).

Perhaps Blake chooses this example in his condemnation of orthodox religion based on what he read at Isaiah 11:3, 4. Here, in verse three, Jesus Christ "shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears." Using Blake's reasoning, because Jesus is a prophet/poet, he can see beyond the senses; he uses his Energy and imagination to judge men. Then, verse four: Jesus will "smite the earth with the rod of his mouth," or the sword that he has sent, and will "slay the wicked one." Blake believes this "wicked one" to be the Devourer, orthodox religion.

Both the relationship between the Prolific and the Devourer, and the interaction between Reason and Energy, are the basis for Blake's declaration, "Without Contraries is no progression." Reason and Energy must always be involved in a struggle with each other (Reason, or the senses, continually threatening to hinder the imagination of Energy) in order for the poet/prophet to be productive. Miller seems disturbed at the fact that this concept of Contraries cannot be pinned down with a definition, as though this is an error in Blake's logic. But this freedom from stable categories or fixed meanings is exactly Blake's point. Blake says that the way orthodox religion pins down the writings of the prophets to rules and codes is damaging because it uses Reason to restrict the imagination of Energy. Blake puts forward his idea of Contraries to reverse the ills orthodox religion has created for man. Thus, Blake would never allow any kind of definition to be drawn from his discussion of Contraries in *The Marriage*. Furthermore, the "marriage" that Blake refers to in his title produces the concept of Contraries. It is the union, or rather, reunion, of Heaven, or "the infinite in every thing," with the Energy, of poets and prophets, which orthodox religion has labelled as Evil, or Hell.

This "progression," or ever-changing state, is important because, for Blake, fixed rules and codes destroy "Human

existence" (3, 9) and "Eternal Delight" (4, 15). By "Human existence" Blake seems to mean not only physical life but spiritual life as well. Because man cannot live up to his full potential as a human without both a physical and spiritual existence, it is possible for him to be dead and still have a physical life. This idea is expressed in *Milton: A Poem* (ca. 1804). When Milton begins his decent from heaven, he exclaims, "I go to Eternal Death!" (14, 33). Interestingly, Eternal Death is not Hell but the earth. Blake does not speak of Hell as a place of fiery torment for the dead nor does he consider it the realm of Satan. Using a Miltonic image, Blake says "on the Earth [is] where Satan / Fell" (22, 20-21). Furthermore, Blake gives the earth the name Ulro, which signifies "The world of pure materialism and delusion, the basest condition to which Man can sink" (Ostriker 1056). For Blake, the base man is one who does not recognize his Poetic Genius and has no spirituality. Just as in She'ol—the Old Testament dwelling place for the dead—man has no relationship with the divine, so in Ulro man has lost contact with the divine because he has become estranged from his imagination. Thus, for Blake, though one can physically walk the earth, spiritually, he may be a dead man. This places even more importance on "progression." Fortunately, even in a fallen state, man can learn new things and continue to improve himself—to "progress"—by gaining insight through his imagination.

Thus far, I have argued that true religious experience must come through the Poetic Genius and that orthodox religion has not encouraged this view. In fact, it has blocked this from happening. Only when man's imagination is freed from its grasp, will man be free to fully realize the revelations with which his imagination provides him, just as the ancient prophets did, and religion will be purified. Now I want to turn to the connection between Blake and Israel's ancient prophets. Blake not only lauded the poet/prophet in his poetry, he became this poet/prophet for England.

Blake's role in urging man to realize the potential of his imagination and the importance of escaping the restrictions of orthodox religion and false beliefs must not be underestimated. The ancient prophets of Israel provided similar encouragement to the Israelites. In fact, the very spiritual existence of their nation relied on keeping the channel between God and the people open by warning them of behavior that would anger their God and force Him to sever this connection. Blake served his own nation in this same way and warned England of the dangers of losing its spirituality—becoming estranged from the imagination. Whereas many discuss Isaiah as a poet, few consider Blake's role as a prophet. The prophets of ancient Israel are often examined as a part of Blake's imaginative, poetic world but Blake is never

described as a prophet, firmly rooted in the business of caring for a nation's spirituality and its relationship with God.

Although a main function of prophecy in which Blake participates is warning men of their possible future and effectively persuading them to change their ways, he also presents these warnings in a way stylistically similar to that used by the ancient prophets. Blake and the Israelite prophets share an apocalyptic style of writing. According to H. H. Rowley, the apocalyptic is "the child of prophecy" (13). It is a specialized prophecy concerned with "the consummation of history" (Scott 4). Apocalyptic writing serves to show the nation—in vivid images and often using symbols with obscure meanings—what will be the consequences of their actions. A discussion of this particular form of prophecy is relevant here because apocalyptic imagery is in fact Blake's forte. R. B. Y. Scott indirectly describes Blake's work in his explanation of apocalyptic scripture: "Apocalyptic, in one sense, is mythology—a pictorial and narrative representation of a reality lying beyond sense experience" (5).

Although the reality of the scenes the prophets described might lie beyond their ability to experience them, the symbols of this reality—their "pictorial representation"—most surely did not. In fact, they were vividly experienced in visions by the prophet Daniel and also by Blake. Blake describes the actions

of Urizen, Los, and a host of other "Eternals" on a grandiose scale similar to the style in which Daniel records his visions. From the age of four Blake saw visions and he "spoke familiarly of [them] as if they were commonplaces, as indeed, they were to him" (Bentley 20). In his *Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), Blake himself compared his own visions to those of the prophets:

The Prophets describe what they saw in Vision as real and existing men whom they saw with their imaginative and immortal organs; the Apostles the same;...A Spirit and a Vision are not, as the modern philosophy supposes, a cloudy vapour or a nothing: they are organized and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce. (*Writings* 848)

Thus, Blake not only wrote of similar things but experienced them in a similar way.

In whatever style their message was written, the prophets addressed the immediate concern which they all shared: the behavior of their fellow Israelites. Their message was not written for the benefit of later generations but was "addressed to men of their own day" and concerned "the conditions and circumstances under which they lived" (Scott 1). The prophets had a "sense of the spiritual importance and moral urgency of the present" (Scott 13). This urgency comes from the fact that the people's future would be "an immediate consequence of their moral and spiritual condition at the moment when the prophet speaks" (Scott 10). Throughout the Jewish nation's long history

of disobedience, the prophets constantly warned the people of the consequences of their behavior.

Blake, speaking as the Bard in *Milton*, continually urges the reader, essentially his fellow Englishman, to "Mark well my words! they are of your eternal salvation" (2, 25). The Book of Isaiah begins with a plea similar to Blake's: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth..." (1:2). Then, speaking the words of God Isaiah has heard in a vision, he accuses the people: "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me" (1:2). Isaiah further calls them a "sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel into anger, they are gone away backward" (1:4). Echoing the voice of his vision, he directs the people to "put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgement, relieve the oppressed..." (1:16-17). Finally, by explaining the consequences of their behavior, he urges them to act: "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword" (1:19-20). In instructing the nation, Isaiah has called for attention, accused them of wrongdoing and explained what this wrongdoing is. Next, he directs them how to correct themselves

and encourages them to do so by outlining the consequences of both a wrong course of action and a right one.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake follows the same pattern. He first accuses the priests of England of perverting the words of the prophets for their own selfish purposes. He then explains how they have made rigid rules out of the imaginative discoveries of the prophets so that they can stifle man's Poetic Genius—his imagination—and be able to rule over him. Just as Isaiah spoke these condemnations from a vision, Blake relates the "Voice of the Devil" when he enumerates the "Errors" of the Priests (4, 1). Blake then instructs the people through some seventy "Proverbs of Hell." When he says, "Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth" (8, 20), he is telling people that everything the human imagination conceives is significant and valueable. The power of the human mind is such that, if it can believe something it can also produce, or create, it—in other words, make it true. The fact remains, however, that fallen man is still distanced from the Eternals and what he perceives is not truth itself but an "image" of truth. Yet, if this image is gained through the use of the imagination, it is true and accurate. This is empowering encouragement for a nation who religion has taught to suppress and ignore its imagination.

Finally, Blake illustrated the consequences of following the laws of religion and of following the path originally intended by the prophets. He does this by relating his conversation with an Angel, who represents religion. The Angel first condemns him for embracing his imagination but then he persuades the Angel, "perhaps you will be willing to shew me my eternal lot & we will contemplate together upon it and see whether your lot or mine is most desirable" (17, 12-14).

The Angel takes him to "the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city" (18, 3-4) through which Devils crawl and in which an ominous storm brews. This appears like a terrible place until the Angel leaves. Then, Blake recalls, "I remain'd alone, & then this appearance was no more, but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moon light hearing a harper who sung to the harp, & his theme was, The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind" (19, 7-9).

It is then the Angel's turn to be shown his "eternal lot." When Blake tells him this, the Angel laughs, perhaps because he feels his situation is pleasant and even righteous, but Blake, through exercising his imagination, shows him the reality of his situation. The pair enter the "void" of heaven and see a church. Inside they see "monkeys" and "baboons" "snatching at one another" (20, 1-2). These represent theologians (Ostriker

902) struggling with each other for supremacy. The scene is vividly grotesque: the strong among them attack the weak "with a grinning aspect, first coupled with & then devoured, by plucking off first one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. this after grinning & kissing it with seeming fondness they devoured too; and here & there I saw one savourily picking the flesh off his own tail" (20, 6-11). Both Blake and the Angel were "terribly annoyd" (20, 11) by this scene and could not remain there.

In this vision, Blake shows that the consequences of following the imagination are ultimately better than those of following religion. By using his imagination, Blake could "[alter] his opinion" of the fiery abyss that the Angel showed him; it became a peaceful moonlit scene. Blake explains to the Angel, "All that we saw was owing to your meta-physics: for when you ran away, I found myself on a bank by moonlight hearing a harper" (19, 12-14). This shows that if one does not exercise his imagination, his mind will become stagnant like "standing water" and he will be susceptible to the metaphysics-or philosophical reasoning-of religion and no matter what it teaches, it will become law and truth to him.

Thus, following the pattern set by the prophets of ancient Israel in writing style, visionary experience and instruction of his nation, Blake urges his countrymen to embrace their

imagination and let it guide them in order to regain spiritual health. Blake saw many signs of spiritual sickness in his society that he felt had been brought about by the supposed stewards of the people's spirituality, the priests and clergymen. As G. E. Bentley puts it, Blake and other religious Dissenters "believed that all institutions, beginning with the Church and the State, were tyrannical attempts to bind to Satan's Kingdom the souls which Christ had come to free..." (8). Blake recognized them as representatives of "the Whore and her Beast" (Bentley xxiv).

To associate religion and its leaders with the Whore and Beast was indeed a heavy statement. In chapter thirteen of the Book of Revelation, the Beast is described as being associated with Satan. In fact, he has given it "his power, and his seat, and great authority" (13:2). It truly does the will of Satan and not of God because "there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies;...And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven" (13:5-7). Blake most likely cross-referenced John's vision here with Daniel's, and identified this Beast as the English government. Whereas John does not record a complete interpretation of this Beast, Daniel explains that it represents a "[king] that will stand up from the earth" (7:17).

As brutal and unjust as the Beast is, the Whore, described in chapter seventeen of the Book of Revelation, is possibly worse. She represents false religion because she deceives man "by [her] sorceries" (18:23), the practice of which Israel viewed as a form of false worship. Yet her blasphemous behavior escalates: she is one "With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication" (17:2). Thus, religion not only blasphemes God but entices another powerful institution of the earth—its governments—to join her. Because government is associated with Satan and the Whore blasphemously represents God, their alliance is not a proper "marriage" but an act of fornication. Furthermore, mankind is oblivious to the harm this alliance causes because it has "been made drunk," unquestioning as to what right religion has to be involved in government. Thus, Blake was deeply angered by the damage done to human spirituality by those claiming to foster it. He records their injustices everywhere in his poetry from the priests of the *Songs of Experience* "binding with briars my joys and desires" to Urizen, the creator of the "Net of Religion," finally being revealed, in *Milton*, as Satan.

Robert Ryan notes that Blake saw natural religion or Deism just as corrupted as state religion, the Church of England. Whereas the state church used "outward ceremony" (qtd in Bentley

10), "power...and laws to bind the consciences of Christians" (Ryan 153), Deism was much more subversive because reason, a function of the human mind, was made to expound religious truths, the proper role of the imagination. However, reason was not the proper conductor of divine truth. Because, as Blake told Crabb Robinson, it is impossible "to explain to the *rational* faculty what the reason cannot comprehend" (Bentley 129), the imagination must receive the divine truth that man needs. In fact, Blake associated Reason with Satan, describing his lies as "Serpent Reasonings" (*For the Sexes* [ca. 1812], "Of the Gates" 5). Just as Satan finds an angelic nemesis in the archangel Michael, Reason is opposed by Imagination in the human mind.

It is in advocating the relationship between man and god where Blake steps into the role of prophet. The ancient prophets of Israel had the same goal: to maintain the link between the people and God. This relationship for the ancient Israelites was much more difficult to maintain than for the Christians. In the Biblical account, God rejected Adam upon his disobedience and this rejection, along with Adam's fall from a perfect condition, led to mankind's estrangement from God. One definition of "perfect" is actually "complete." Thus, when the first man lost his perfection, he lost his ability to be

complete before God and to fulfill his role in the relationship between him and God.

The Israelite was very aware of this "incompleteness." When God showed that he was offering man the chance to have a relationship with Him again, by forming the covenant with Abraham, man had to make efforts to "complete" himself in order to be worthy to approach God again. Provisions were made for man to complete himself through burnt sacrifice. Thus, in the time of the prophets, a relationship between man and God was made possible through sacrifices made by man and then only if God accepted them.

When the people behaved in such a way that angered God, the prophet spoke out (whether commanded to by God or of his own accord) and urged them to change. Otherwise, their sacrifices would be rejected and they would lose their relation with God. Thus, the prophets' role in ancient Israel was to promote social change to keep the lines of communication open between man and the divine. Blake had the same goal in his making men aware of their imagination.

Like the Dissenters, Blake believed that divine revelation happened internally rather than externally—"that the proper interpreter of [the] truth is the individual conscience, not the priest or the church" (Bentley 7). Blake wrote that "Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists... A Poet a Painter a

Musician an Architect: the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian" (qtd in Bentley xxv). Thus, imagination is not only the site for artistic creativity but for divine revelation of truth, as well. Every individual is capable of this relationship because, as Blake told Crabb Robinson, "Christ *'is the only God..And so am I and so are you'*" (Bentley 9). Thus, Blake disagreed with religion stressing reason over imagination (those who used imagination they gave the derogatory name "Enthusiast") because they were actually blocking a relationship with God rather than facilitating it.

In Blake's prophecy described above, he relates that imagination is the locus of human happiness. This is because it is also the site of man's spirituality. Furthermore, the imagination, or Poetic Genius, is the basis for the religions of all nations and "is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy" (*All Religions*). Thus, if prophecy is to function as the tutor for a nation and if prophecy and spirituality are both rooted in the imagination, or Poetic Genius, then to follow the imagination is to act upon divine guidance.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Blake are from this ed. unless otherwise noted. Parenthetical references to poems are line numbers.

² Subsequent references to plates and lines will be in the following format: 12, 6-8.

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