

As the Caterpillar Chooses: William Blake's Hell and the Church's Condescension

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Abstract. William Blake's (1757-1827) work did not see the resounding success in his time as it does today. A vocal critic of the Church, he expressed his ideas in engravings, poems, and prose, creating his own complex Christian-esque history that he felt encapsulated the good of the religion while excluding the unsavory parts of the institutional organization. Over time, his writings have gained more widespread support, with fears of dissent from those in charge dissipating. Through his works "The Tyger," "The Garden of Love," and "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," as well as the writings of Blakeian scholars, Blake's critiques of the Church are demonstrated to be rooted in his belief that the Church is incapable of trusting its followers, instead prescribing a narrow lens in which worship cannot stray far from.

William Blake's religious beliefs have been contested for centuries. While it is clear he holds his faith very dear, his version of Christianity has culminated in his own mythology of religion. His poems, texts, and engravings weave a tapestry of epic proportion, telling the story of what Blake feels is his answer to life's questions. His religious journey is marked by being an outsider to mainstream beliefs due to his mistrust in the Church of England as an institution. Through *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as well as being supplemented by his poems "The Tyger" and "The Garden of Love," Blake makes a clear argument that his emphatic dislike for institutionalized Christianity lies in the Church's inability to trust in humanity.

Blake's extensive use of priestly imagery throughout his works highlight his attitudes towards the Church. His poem, "The Garden of Love," positions priests as figures that poison the natural beauty of the Garden and the memories of the speaker. The Chapel fills the space that he used to play in, turning the green into grey. No more flowers thrive in the Garden; instead, tombstones,

a marker of decay, litter it. Priests walk around in somber black gowns "binding with briars, my joys and desires" (Blake, 1794, p. 40). Blake characterizes these priests as forces that seek to constrict. To him, the Church is not an institution promoting freedom of the mind and soul. Instead, the Church destroys the natural beauty of the world with buildings designed to tell believers what they cannot do. Blake believes that religion is not about promising an undying allegiance to the Church. It is about being able to "play on the green" and appreciate what God has created in its purest form (Blake, 1794, p. 40). Blake sees priests as the vehicle for control: they maintain the image of the Church, they serve as the messengers of God, and they speak in terms of what "thou shalt not" do, instead of promoting what should be done. The priests are walking their rounds because they desire total control of the Chapel's perimeter, standing guard in order to preserve the image and power of the Chapel that now defines the Garden of Love. Before the Chapel, the Garden was a perfect image of God. The speaker seeks to return to that perfection,

living out a full embrace of God's gifts. The Chapel removes this freedom to worship individually and replaces it with an austere prescription of how to worship. Even though the same God is present in both the Garden and the Chapel, the priests are not trusting in those who worship in their own way.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), Blake writes an even more scathing and direct opinion about priests. In Plate 11, Blake describes the "animation" of Earthly objects, showing how every object that humans can sense has an implicit value assigned to them by God or Genius, the divinity housed within every person. Eventually, however, Priesthood "took advantage of and enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects" (1793, p. 74). Blake paints the priests as predators seeking out prey who are too foolish to not accept their message. Their whole existence is to forcibly promote this single way of thinking in order to subordinate the masses. Blake again references to this implicit value of things when describing "mental deities." Just as Blake sees in the Garden, everything in existence has Godly value, and priests disturb this natural perfection by trying to separate the value from the object. The natural tendency of humanity is to appreciate the beauty in objects and view the beauty as an intrinsic quality; the Church aims to separate the beauty from the object and tear apart at this fabric of value. The institution does not trust in a natural human comprehension of God. To them, everything must be spelled out directly to the people so that there are no discrepancies between belief systems. This is also seen in "The Proverbs of Hell," where Blake states, "As the caterpillar chooses the fairest leaves to lay her eggs on, so the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys" (1793, p. 73). Just as the caterpillar's purpose is to protect her unborn offspring and further her generation, the priest feels it is imperative to constrict and condemn even the most appropriate desires to maintain the power of the Church. Blake, who had not set foot in a Church in the last forty years of his life, felt that people should pursue their own personal religion without anyone telling them what that should look like (Essick, 2005). Blake's criticisms of priests highlight his frustration with the Church's mistrust in people's abilities to worship the "right" God.

The Christian dogma heavily features the idea of opposites: Heaven and Hell, God and Satan, Adam and Eve, etc. Blake (1793), however, departs from the common Christian mentality that opposites have different meaning and value. In "The Argument" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake stresses the importance of having opposites, although he frames it in a different matter compared to the Bible. "Without contraries is no progression...From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy" (Blake, 1793, p. 70). Later on, Blake, through the voice of the Devil, describes how "Energy Is Eternal Delight" and how "Energy is the only life and is from the Body" (p. 70). Blake is promoting the embrace of Energy, or sin, completely going against the teachings of the Church. To him, the soul and the body are one, and if the body is construed with the ability to desire, it must be a gift from God to be able to achieve that desire. The Christian tradition positions these two opposites as a binary choice: either make the right choice or the wrong choice. However, Blake sees both choices as the right choice. Just because there is a Good and Evil does not mean Good is better or more fulfilling than Evil. Evil is an active passion, one that helps people appreciate their ability and the beauty of their world. The title of this work directly reflects this: Heaven and Hell are not two separate voids. They are not exclusive, nor are they only suitable for specific types of people. They are the same thing: Hell is Energy is Eternal Delight is Heaven. Their marriage marks the acceptance that strict adherence to the Church does not equal a "good" life. To Blake, desiring more is a gift from God. His beliefs fall in line with the idea of the Fortunate Fall, in which Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit was a gift to humanity rather than an eternal condemnation, since it allowed for Jesus's redemption of the human race (Lovejoy, 1937). Blake believes that Eve was perfectly valid in eating the apple, for it promised wisdom, which is something that every human should strive for. To Blake, the Church pushes the dichotomy between Good and Evil because Evil actions are too freeing. Heaven must be the only viable option for the Church to maintain its power. Institutionalized

Christianity values subservience, and only doing Good places the populace under control, while acting according to desires is much harder to control. The Church needs punishment to be imminent, so they construe Evil as a damning force rather than an enlightening one. Blake conflates Jesus and Satan to show that these contraries are helpful rather than hurtful (Altizer, 2017), and in doing so, shows how the Church controls their believer's actions out of mistrust that they will not know how to be active, not passive.

"The Tyger" highlights this conflation of Good and Evil further. In this poem, the speaker wonders who could create such a fearsome creature. "Did he smile his work to see? \ Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" (Blake, 1794, p. 38). It may seem that this question is asked to distance the tiger from God, who does not make anything so terrible. However, the speaker is in awe at the power of the tiger and ponders at the possibility of its creator being the same who created "the Lamb," both an allusion to another Blake poem, and to the son of God, Jesus. The speaker is not implying that the tiger is ungodly or a work of the Devil; instead, the speaker is admiring the horror that the tiger inspires and believes that this Evil is worthy of admiration. In other words, "The tiger is not the contrary of the Lamb but its negation" (Damon, 2013, p. 414). It is a mirror image of the Lamb, Jesus, not a polar opposite. They may seem like an unlikely pairing, yet they inspire the same feelings to the speaker. The speaker sees Evil for what it really is: Energy, an active passion, not an immediate path to Hell. To Blake, this powerful tiger is a symbol of the beauty of God. It is not to be banished or cast away, since "the world can only be known as being inseparable from the subject, but so likewise the subject must be understood as being 'destined to be in this world'" (Altizer, 2000, p. 14). If Evil is destined in the world, why does the Church insist that Evil is to be banished? Blake admires the Evil in the world and sees desire as a holy feeling. The Church, however, does not. Perhaps allowing all desires to be chased is a dangerous message for the Church to send. It is clear that the institution is weary of the judgment of people. To Blake, the tiger is a sign of beauty, but to the Church, they fear it will catalyze a hedonistic revolution.

Much of Blake's ideas on religion stem from his brief acceptance and eventual dismissal of the ideas of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was a scientist turned spiritual visionary, claiming to have been in communication with various Biblical figures, thus unlocking the true meaning of Scripture. The New Jerusalem Church, Swedenborg's institution, was the only religious organization that Blake ever belonged to (Rix, 2006). While Swedenborg was far from a mainstream religious figure, Blake still drew inspiration from him, eventually satirizing him in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

Blake was a strict antinomian. Antinomianism, meaning "anti-law", is the belief that "Christ had abolished the Moral Law *universally* for all mankind" (Rix, 2006, p. 109). This means that there is no need for people to justify themselves in their beliefs with outward actions; instead, faith is internal and is the only thing necessary for salvation. To Blake, outward grace is the most important part of being a Christian. Swedenborg, however, was a firm believer in the important of the Ten Commandments and felt that they were the pinnacle of desired human behavior (Rix, 2006). Without them, Swedenborg felt that humans might as well be lawless creatures. He saw the Commandments as the foundation of which a Christian builds their faith; without strictly adhering to these rules, there is no hope for salvation.

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the conversation between the speaker, Isaiah, and Ezekiel serves as a fierce satire of Swedenborg's alleged dialogue between him and angels and devils. Plates 22-26 detail the conversation, with the speaker asking the prophets how they were so sure that God spoke to them (Blake, 1793, p.79-82). Isaiah replies with a decidedly Swedenborgian response, stating that he did not sense a finite representation of God, but an infinite and indirect one, eventually leading to the speaker asking a straightforward question: "Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?" (Blake, 1793, p. 74). Blake asks this question to highlight the unproveable nature of Swedenborg's claims. Blake grows disenchanted by Swedenborg's assertions, sensing that Swedenborg only believes that he spoke with angels. Blake goes even further in displaying his disdain for Swedenborg's ideas, claiming that

he only recycles falsehoods, and that everything he says is superficial (1793). While Swedenborgianism is far from institutionalized religion, it is important to note that Blake is not opposed to joining some form of a religious community at one point of his life. Even in Swedenborgianism, a more mythical sect of Christianity, Blake still sees the same amount of zealous control over the believers. The Ten Commandments ruled Swedenborgians, preventing them from reaching Eternal Delight. Blake's antinomian tendencies expose this sect's misguided attempt at control in response to mistrusting people's judgment.

Blake also uses Biblical passages and figures to highlight this oppressive suspicion. In the first few lines of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he calls to the Beatitudes. "Once meek, and in a perilous path \ The just man kept his course along \ The Vale of Death... \ Till the villain... \ drive[s] \ The just man into barren climes" (*King James Bible*, 2014, Matthew 5:5). This "meek" man is a reference to Matthew 5:5, which states "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (*King James Bible*). However, in this excerpt, the man is being guided on a dangerous path towards "barren climes". This meek man is not inheriting the earth in Blake's text; rather, he is being driven out of it. To Blake, meek is a synonym of passive, which will not achieve Eternal Delight. Blake is suggesting that the Church's mantra of "blessed are the meek" is a cultural sedative, and it results in people being guided towards a vast wasteland. Institutional Christianity bears no fruit; this wasteland only serves as a pasture to herd followers, disallowing any sort of free thought or self-discovery.

Blake's representation of Hell in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* also promotes this idea of mistrust of the people from the Church. An angel shows the speaker his "eternal lot," or personal Hell, in detail, with Leviathan, a serpent monster, being surrounded by blood and fire (Blake, 1793, p. 77). However, when the Angel who showed him his lot leaves, the speaker suddenly "remained alone, and then this appearance was no more; but I found myself sitting on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight, hearing a harper who sung to the harp" (Blake, 1793, p. 77). The Angel's effect is only felt with direct contact and its overburdening

presence. As soon as it leaves, the classic image of Hell demonstrated to the speaker is revealed to be a façade, and the speaker finds himself in a pleasant place, free from blood and fire. The Angel created the speaker's Hell specifically for him only to promote pious behavior, showing how there are no real consequences for following your own religion; the consequences only exist as long as the Church says they do. Blake shows that the Church requires the archetypal image of Hell to exist as a method of controlling its believers. Without fear of eternal punishment, there would be no Church. The Church uses scare tactics to ensure that they can predict the behavior of their believers. Interestingly, the Angel tells the speaker what his own "eternal lot" appeared as, and his Hell seemed much more visceral and hellish than the speaker's lot. In it, monkeys and baboons mutilate each other with an almost perverted gusto (Blake, 1793). In doing so, Blake seems to suggest that a special, more nightmarish Hell is reserved for those who trick their followers. The speaker is never in fear of punishment because he did nothing wrong. However, the Angel does not act in good faith, resulting in his punishment being far more visceral and consequential than the speaker's.

The Church of England had an iron grip on society in Blake's time. The Church controlled, or at least influenced almost every part of life, including government policy and social norms. Any deviation from the Church's tenets could mean imprisonment or death. Blake understood the way the Church maintained control, and he understood the reasons why they did. The Church could not trust its followers to stay faithful; therefore, the institution employed scare tactics and shared falsehoods according to Blake. Blake's own version of Christianity seeks to repair the main thing he finds broken in the institution's: Blake trusts in the judgment of the people, while the Church views them as a threat which must be contained.

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