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What Kind of Christian was Blake?*

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There are many of us—an ever-growing number—who see William Blake as something more than a poet, more than a painter, more than the creator of illuminated books worthy, as examples of religious art, to be set beside the illuminated missals and Gospels of the Christian Middle Ages. We see him—and he saw himself—as a prophet; the one prophet of the English nation, the prophet of his and our city of London. Some perhaps think of prophets as belonging to a primitive past, with the shaman and the witch-doctor. Blake did not: he spoke as the prophet of a new age, of the modern world to which we ourselves belong. He knew that he was speaking to a future generation, to whom his words, unheeded and barely understood by his contemporaries, would carry the truth he saw; and there are many at this time, and above all among the young who speak of the 'Age of Aquarius' into which the world is entering, who feel that Blake's message is addressed especially to them. And they are right.

Some of these perhaps misunderstand that message and see Blake as merely a political rebel with a message of revolution. But the Blake of the campus is a mere caricature cartoon figure with no depth. Blake was indeed at one time a supporter of the movements towards liberty in America and France. Later he was to see politics (in his own words) as 'something other than human life'. His were the politics of eternity; his concern, to denounce, in the light of eternity, the politics of time. He could never have been a Marxist, for he believed the human soul to be the immortal dwelling-place of the 'divine humanity'. Throughout his life he declared himself to be 'a worshipper of Jesus' (again his own words). We must also remember that he was a supporter of Catholic emancipation; that he is remembered as saying that no

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subjects on earth were as happy as those of the pope. He meant, of course, that of all forms of government a theocracy is the best. In his illustrations to the Book of Job he expressed the essence of the Jewish tradition. His last great work was his unfinished series of illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

A prophet is not just an old name for a political agitator. As Blake understood prophecy, it is utterance inspired by God—by the 'God within'. Prophecy may be poetry, but poetry is prophecy only when it is inspired by that 'other' mind which some at this time would better understand as the 'collective unconscious', *anima mundi*, or by some other name. Blake believed that he wrote from the dictation of the indwelling Imagination of God; sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time would so come to him, as he tells us. Yet he did not, therefore, see himself as a man set apart; for he believed the prophetic gift to be latent in every one, by virtue of our common human nature. Inspiration comes to all who listen and attend; and far from thinking himself more than normal, he bitterly deplored the 'deadly sleep' which renders most of us so much less than we might be. His call was for one thing only—not moral repentance for 'sin', but for spiritual awakening. He would have everyone attend to the indwelling divine spirit that speaks through the prophets of all generations.

THE INNER LIFE

Blake was the prophet of the 'God within', whom he calls the 'Divine Humanity', or 'Jesus, the Imagination'. He was a prophet of the spiritual religion. We do not live from 'nature' or by the senses, but through the indwelling immortal spirit. Modern attitudes of Behaviourism and the like had their roots in the materialist philosophy of Bacon, and especially of Locke, who held that man is only a natural organ subject to sense, that all knowledge comes to us through the senses. Blake, almost alone in his generation, declared that imagination is the spirit of life that sees not 'with' but 'through' the eye, and understands the qualities of things.

Blake's world was not outside, but within consciousness, a living world not a lifeless structure of material particles.

To a patron who had complained that Blake's 'visions' are not to be found in this world, he wrote a letter, in which he answers the charge of being unworldly:

I feel that a man may be happy in this world [he wrote], and I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. To the eyes of a miser a guinea is more beautiful than the sun, and a bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity, and by these I shall not regulate my proportions; and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, Nature is imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers. You certainly mistake if you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. To me this world is all one continued vision of fancy or imagination.

TO SEE A WORLD

There are certainly many today for whom a guinea is more beautiful than the sun, or who see the sun (again I quote Blake) as 'a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea'. But Blake did not see it so:

Oh no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty'.

But was Blake's 'Jesus the Imagination' the Jesus of the Church? For him everyone is 'a divine member of the divine Jesus', the living imagination present in, and to, all mankind. The Jesus of the Gospels was, he says, 'all imagination, and acted from impulse, and not from rules'. But every human being is a living member of 'the divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, the Human Imagination'. Blake's Jesus is born anew in every birth, every life, dies in every death, is resurrected in every spirit.

Yet Blake was, I believe, only superficially unorthodox; if by orthodox we mean not a set of rules, but that which corresponds to spiritual reality, St. Augustine's 'one unanimous and universal tradition'.

It is true that he went to church only three times in his life: the first time, to be baptised in the marble font, with its carvings of Adam and Eve and the Tree, in St James's Piccadilly. You may see it there, for it was saved, during the blitz, from the bomb which destroyed much of

the church. The second time was when he brought his Catherine, daughter of a Battersea market-gardener, to be married in this church beside London's great river: a wave in the current of its 'liquid history'. The third time was to his burial in Bunhill Fields. It is characteristic of Blake that the grave itself is lost—its site is only approximately known; for to him the mortal body was only the 'garment', not 'the man', the vesture of the spirit for a little while in this 'world of generation'.

But if Blake was not a Churchman it was because he believed the Church, in his time and place, had departed from the spiritual religion of Jesus. In the popular 'Deism', or 'Natural Religion', Blake saw the first of those compromises with the materialism of modern science of which we have seen many in this time. God had become the remote creator of a vast mechanistic universe, Newton's 'Starry wheels', wound up to operate by the 'laws of nature' without divine intervention. God as the creator of this vast machine was regarded with abject awe: man reduced to the insignificance of the 'mortal worm', helpless in an inscrutable universe of which duration and extension are the measure; a 'reign of quantity'.

Blake's 'Satanic Mills' are these laws of nature, the Newtonian universe conceived as a great inhuman mechanism. The industrial landscape is indeed built in the likeness of that mechanism, by a society which conceived the universe in terms of a materialist science; for we are for ever building our human world in the image of our dreams and our ideologies. But Blake was not overawed by vastness; for he knew that eternity is not to be found in space, and that the Kingdom of Heaven is 'within'. The god of the Deists was outside man; Blake's God was the God within: within not man alone, but in every grain of sand and particle of dust, in the minute flower, the little winged fly. It is of the false god of the Deists that Blake wrote:

He wither'd up the Human Form
By laws of sacrifice for sin,
Till it became a Mortal Worm,
But O! translucent all within.

For Blake, 'Small is Beautiful':

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

For Blake the symbols of the infinite and the eternal are the minute; the 'matron clay' who nourishes the worm upon its 'dewy bed', the bird from whose heart comes song, the flowers of thyme and meadow-sweet from whose minute centre comes sweetness. To man he restored the dignity and centrality in his own universe of which scientific materialism and its idolatrous worship of magnitude had for a time deprived us. He turned the universe inside out, and taught, as did Jesus, that 'what is above is within'; that 'every natural effect has a spiritual cause and not a natural. Natural cause only seems.'

It may well be that the greatest revolution of this century may prove to have been not the political upheavals motivated by a desire only for a redistribution of wealth and power; but a change of the premises of civilization. To the scientific age, matter has seemed the undeniable basis of all reality; a view scarcely challenged—or inadequately challenged—by the churches. But about the turn of this century there began, in many fields, a rediscovery of mind, of consciousness itself. The psychology of Freud and of Jung; investigations in the field of psychical research; the widespread interest in the Far Eastern religions, for which mind is the unquestioned first principle; the theosophical movement; the revival of interest in the beliefs held by primitive peoples about the nature of things, are but a few of the signs of the new orientation. Blake too was for the first time published; the first edition of his Prophetic Books was edited by Edwin J. Ellis and by William Butler Yeats, the greatest poet of this century and himself a voice of the New Age.

For Blake, there was no need to go to India for the true religion; all religions, he believed, are one, all are grounded in the human Imagination, the Divine Humanity who was, for him, Jesus Christ. The 'religion of Jesus', long misunderstood, was about to be revealed, so Blake believed, in the discovery that God is not outside but within us.

A diarist of the day, Henry Crabb Robinson, a friend of Wordsworth and of Coleridge, was much exercised over Blake's orthodoxy, and put to him bluntly the question of his belief concerning Jesus Christ. 'He was the Son of God,' Blake answered; and then added, 'And so am I, and so are you.'