

The Sea of Time and Faith:

William Blake and religion as a human creation.

by Christopher Bucklow

“ ‘Christ’ he said - ‘he is the only God’ - But then he added - ‘And so am I and so are you’ ”. So the young journalist Henry Crabb Robinson reported a conversation with the poet and artist William Blake in the early years of the nineteenth century. This is a typical Blake statement - pithy, almost aphoristic, but nevertheless ambiguous - while suggesting a range of individualistic opinions on the nature of the human and the divine - and their points of connection in the Incarnation.

Interpreting just what Blake believed is always difficult, but we might begin to understand him here by noting that in his other writings he uses the term ‘Christ’ as a personal symbol for the human faculty he calls ‘imagination’ - so that his words to Crabb Robinson would perhaps not only indicate that he believed the divine being of Jesus to be coexistent with every human individual, but that the true saviour of humanity is our imagination.

Of course, Blake uses ‘imagination’ in a very specific form (though common in his time) -one which contains our own twentieth-century sense, but within larger ideas of creativity in the area of the mind we would now call the unconscious. Jesus, Blake might have contended, is our culture’s cipher for the pre-conscious imaginative energy within our species.

The sort of interpretative distance implied in this decipherment of the deep codes of religion gapes widely right the way through Blake’s writings. And if our understanding of him has to remain tentative, what does seem certain is that he does indeed obtain a remarkable critical remove from his own culture and its religious and philosophical institutions. He was able to analyse the state of the imagination - that is the mental environment he was born within, in truly radical and impressively ‘objective’ terms. This makes him an important precursor figure for the Sea of Faith movement - and his particular way of analyzing Christianity makes him a writer whose intellectual technique still has much relevance for our thinking today.

In some ways Blake was before his time. He was certainly hampered by the lack of a standard vocabulary for the structures of the mind - the sort of vocabulary which was eventually established eighty to a hundred years later. In the face of this lack, Blake, as we saw in the example above, invented his own terms. There is in fact a vast constellation of names that he gave to the various mental energies and faculties. Throughout his poems and paintings these energies were personified as individual beings inhabiting the city he called Golgonooza (from golgos or skull) - the ‘city’ within his own mind. One might almost claim that Blake was an early psychologist, for his own interest was almost exclusively in the economy of mental phenomena we contain as individuals - and which in collective form drive the events of history.

Given this psychological context, there would appear to be little room to doubt that he must have believed religion to be a human creation. And yet one could counter that he considered the human mind (if not the universe) to be contained within the mind of God. To this one might retort that he also believed the mind of God to be the "human form divine" - that is, perhaps, a mental patterning in which we are all cast as we pass from the general idea of a human into an individual within the material world - in his own terminology 'the Sea of Time and Space'. One sees here not only the complexity of a study of his thought, but also a key to a clearer understanding of him.

The crucial point is exactly that his world-view is totally psychological. In one way or another he seems to have believed that the universe, at least the only universe we can know, is necessarily contained within the human mind (in some ways this relates closely to Don Cupitt's view of language). This, one might easily argue must include, not only the whole doctrinal structure of established religion, but also the person or idea of God.

Logically (to use the faculty most criticised by Blake - though probably most used by him) if his view is purely psychological, then we would expect him to quarrel with the Deist's Realist position in which God is seen as an external being. And this is, in fact, exactly his problem with that Eighteenth-century religious tendency. Deism tends to see God as remote, not only in space but also in time (having set the universe going at the creation and then retreated to a respectable distance). Deism, moreover, located the universe's sole spiritual dimension within that remote God, suggesting that 'nowadays' in secular time and space, all is material - sacred time being in the distant past. By contrast Blake located sacred time as 'now' - or more exactly 'always' (and the material and spiritual are linked indissolubly together in that 'always').

We should also suspect his psychologism as predisposing him towards an a-historical, non-realist view of Christian history. And again he appears to have views that fit closely with this. Though Jesus was for him an historical person, his true relevance, as we have seen, is as a living force within the individual mind. Going further than this, Blake seems to have thought of the whole Bible as a "Great Code" of psychological reality - from which he could draw examples of all the mental modes possible within human life.

The resurrection, for instance, he considered to be an event that may occur - potentially - in the life of all individuals (presumably as the imagination releases them from the living death as slaves to the law of reason). In the wider social context Blake's many images of the unrisen Christ must represent the imagination entombed within the Law of the established church. Likewise the Last Judgement might be thought of, not as a single event at the end of time, but as a psychological event - often repeated, and within time; as the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth (if self-knowledge is attained within a human life). For these reasons it is possible to see that when Blake used the words 'The Heavens' he was actually speaking of the inner spaces of the mind - spaces which, of course for him also contained the 'Hells'.

These 'Hells' within our mental heavens must for Blake have been seen as realms from which energies and creative impulses emerged. In this view the God of our universe today is the God of Reason - a sub-god who stole a portion of these heavens, closed them off, and 'fell' (rose, as we might see it today) into the world of the self and the conscious. In the illustration, plate eleven from the Book of Job (cover) we see Job discovering at last that the God he had worshipped is false and is actually Satan. Blake's depiction is probably intended to recall conventional images of God the Father, and we see him as 'Reason' (in Blake's nomenclature 'Urizen'; literally "your-reason" or Ur-reason) - the law giver; the god of vengeful justice, with his tablets, entwined by the serpent and with a cloven hoof.

Keeping in mind that Blake's view of 'Reason' is conditioned by the norms of his own times - with all the force of repressed Eighteenth-century desire - presumably his point is that internally, Lucifer (the light bringer from the unconscious) has been falsely demonized by this Reasoning principle, and therefore that the first person of the trinity (internally and externally) is in fact Satan, the most successful double agent in history, who has not only infiltrated the organization, but become its head and orchestrated a campaign of propaganda and misinformation which over the centuries has come to be believed and worshipped as the truth. Christ, in this account, must be seen to be of the devil's party - a man who acted from spontaneous love, from the imaginative or unconscious realm rather than from within the Law.

Blake often allows a number of figures to stand for one of his principles - so, for example, his own invented figure Los (presumably Sol backwards - either as an inner sun or the sun of Hell) shares his identity with Christ. One might think that Blake the imaginative artist identifies himself wholly with his hero, the Los-Christ figure, but this is to forget that all the characters of his psychological myth are aspects of Blake himself.

Only in aggregation can we say that these sub-characters are a complete self-portrait. Blake is just as much the Urizen-God-the-Father principle as he is Los-Jesus - perhaps more so in fact - as Urizen appears to be the rationalist Blake; the figure that the imaginative Blake struggled against determinedly throughout his life.

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