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William Blake

‘Stones of Law’: Antinomianism in William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Religious law and written doctrine cloud the perspective of human morality. The content of the “Moral Law” that William Blake speaks of is consistently valid; however, the way it is used to instruct human life is erroneous. Written religious law teaches what William Blake denies, in that human morality is shaped upon those original-founding principles that exist within the Decalogue. In this denial of a salvation obtained by following written religious law and principle, Blake’s work takes on an antinomian form. This 16th century theological motivation challenges the conventionalities of written religion during the time of Blake’s work; however, an examination of antinomian principles within *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* supports that William Blake surely rejected a socially established morality and conformist salvation under written religious doctrine.

William Blake finds religious division between the Gospel of Jesus and the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments represent a written religious code that promotes repression and prohibition of natural inclinations in human life. The Gospel of Jesus is largely where Blake aligns himself, for this gospel promotes forgiveness and love. The written law that is the Decalogue teaches the restraint of desire, and affirms that in following each guideline, salvation can be achieved fully in death. However, antinomianism denies this claim.

Antinomianism, within religion, is a rejection of a socially established morality.¹ Blake believes in a different form of salvation that produces everlasting joy and truth in humanity without

¹ "Antinomianism" *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomian>

following the conventional “Moral Law[s]” of God and the Church. Blake asserts that true salvation in human life comes from imagination and an expression of our subconscious desires. In straying away from the repressive nature of the Decalogue, human life is able to foster in a true manner. Blake emphasizes the importance of our subconscious, and often affirms that human life cannot reach any point of truth or reality if these subconscious thoughts and inherent desires are continuously prohibited. William Blake, as an antinomian, believes in human instinct rather than religion. He resists written law and the conventional laws of Christ and the Church. He replaces the written doctrine with expression and energy, which produces a much different form of morality.

William Blake’s antinomian principles come to fruition within his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake satirizes the Ten Commandments and expresses his absolute rejection of Christian law and written doctrine, and in doing so he places the enigmatic demon figures in the work above the less exciting angels. There is already a division between what is conventionally good and what is evil in the title; however, the division only deepens as the plot thickens.

Following “The Argument”, the division between good and evil is expressed as Blake writes,

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to human existence. 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. (Plate 3, Lines 6-10).

All “contraries” are needed in human life, and more specifically for a full human existence.

These opposites create a division in humanity that can repress or express the subconscious. The morality that rests behind the human subconscious is decided upon the execution of those inherent desires in the human mind. Unconventionally, Blake inverts the expected roles of good and evil in human life. Blake supports the “active springing from Energy” and rejects the

“passive that obeys Reason”. This inversion fosters Blake’s antinomian principles, for he rejects a socially conventional morality through a passive and reasonable outlook. Inherent and instinctual desires that are expressed from the subconscious drive the necessary energies that foster a real and full human existence.

Blake’s rejection of conventional religious law is clear as he satirizes the Decalogue in the section, “The voice of the Devil”. His satirization deepens the polarization between reason and energy, and good and evil. Blake attacks the conventional religious “Moral law” by creating his own version of written decree and writes,

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors. 1. That Man has two real existing principles Viz: a Body & a Soul. 2. That Energy, calld Evil, is alone from the Body, & that Reason calld Good, is alone from the Soul. 3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies...(Plate 4, Lines 1-5).

Blake now divides “Man” into a body and soul, and separates these between reason and energy and good and evil. In doing so, Blake has divided human existence into two sections. There is the “Body” and physical part of man that is considered “Evil” under religious doctrine, and that promotes the following of human “Energy”, or subconscious expression. There is also the “Soul”, and mental aspect to man, that is seen as “Good”. The soul promotes reason, but this reason is heavily limited. However, this division of “Man” cannot promote full existence without the contraries being presented or true, for all must be present for human life to reach full imaginative potential.

Blake presents the contraries to this division of “Man” into a body of energy and soul of reason. Energy is not always bad, just as reason is certainly not always good. So, Blake says that the “following Contraries to these are True”(Plate 4, Line 6) and writes,

1 Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that calld Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age. 2. Energy is the only life and is from the

Body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. 3. Energy is Eternal Delight (Plate 4, Lines 7-12).

Written Biblical code supports salvation under a repression of many inherent desires that reside in the human subconscious; however, here, Blake supports the expression of human “Energies” for a lasting salvation. He affirms that the body and soul are one, and they work in accordance with one another to create life and “Eternal Delight”. Blake’s antinomianism supports that “those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained”(Plate 5, Lines 1-2). The restraint of desire is the restraint of imagination and a full human existence. Restraining oneself from the inherent necessities that arise in the subconscious is to follow the written code of instruction in the Decalogue and other specific Biblical doctrine. So, Blake advocates for an expression of inherent energies, and a denial of repressive reason. In these “sacred codes” and the contraries to his three original codes, Blake is repeating notions of resistance to written law, and the antinomian doctrine of a radical monism and immanence.²

Following the polarization of the human form and the division of good and evil, aligned with reason and energy, Blake dives into his unique chapter—“The Proverbs of Hell”. These proverbs satirize the proverbs within the traditional Bible, as they metaphorically seem nearly sacrilegious. However, these heretical remarks do embody a constant cycle of creation that supports Blake’s antinomian beliefs. The Proverbs were not dependent on logical construction by Blake and were primarily imaginative, transmitted religious truths that arose from Blake’s intuitive flashes of vision.³ These imaginative codes cover a broad area of human existence.

² Stanger, James. "The Antinomians and the History of Blake Criticism." *Mrbould.com* (1997): n. pag. *University of California, Riverside*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.

³ John Villalobos. “William Blake's ‘Proverbs of Hell’ and the Tradition of Wisdom Literature.” *Studies in Philology*, vol. 87, no. 2, 1990, pp. 246–259. www.jstor.org/stable/4174361.

Blake writes proverbs that concern the expression of our inherent desires: “He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence”(Plate 7, Line 9). He includes proverbs that speak of religious power: “The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God”(Plate 8, Line 5). Blake also includes statements that relate to forgiveness and loving redemption in the eyes of God: “The thankful receiver bears a plentiful harvest”(Plate 9, Line 16). However, to support his antinomian principles within the “Proverbs of Hell”, Blake writes “The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow, nor the lion, the horse, how he shall take his prey”(Plate 9, Line 14-15). Here, Blake is expressing that there should not be one set of rules to be followed by all, but rather there should be infinite possibility for man. The “Proverbs of Hell” exemplify Blake’s support of energy and imaginative salvation following human life. Blake, through his heretical remarks, rejects a conventional salvation under God’s rule but supports one through a “cleansed perception” and wide lens of reality.

Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* consistently presents this polarization between good and evil; however, the antinomian principles that lie beneath this division explain Blake’s desire to promote a human morality that is guided by imaginative and socially unconventional thought. In his section “A Memorable Fancy”, Blake writes of “sensual enjoyment”(Plate 14, Line 7) and the “fury of spiritual existence”(Plate 18, Line 24). In this chapter Blake presents his most overt affirmation of sexuality as a positive form of personal fulfillment, and he aligns his antinomian beliefs with the expression of this human sexual desires to reach a alternative salvation in the end of life.

In the first “Memorable Fancy”, the angel and speaker explore the netherworlds to resolve theological disputes.⁴ Blake solidifies his belief in the “Poetic Genius” and imagination as the most beneficial way to achieve full salvation in both the body and spirit. Blake has the prophet Ezekiel say,

Then Ezekiel said. The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception. Some nations help one principle for the origin & some another. We of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative (Plate 12, Lines 14-18)

This emphasizes what the heart knows, and that is the “Poetic Genius” and imagination.⁵ The emphasis on “human perception” supports this rejection of conventional salvation in death through following the written law of the Decalogue. When man, or woman, perceives what they desire—and does not repress these subconscious urges—the truth reveals itself. Imaginative thought is not limiting, nor is the “Poetic Genius” a limiting force upon human action.

In the second “Memorable Fancy” Blake beckons to those who deny the courageous few that challenge conventional law. Blake writes,

The giants who formed this world into its sensual existence and now seem to live in its chains, are in truth, the causes of its life & the sources of all activity, but the chains are the cunning of weak and tame minds, which have power to resist energy, according to the proverb, the weak in courage is strong in cunning. (Plate 16, Lines 1-5)

The “giants who formed this world” support a “sensual existence” for those that inhabit it, thus supporting a free and expressive spirit in man and woman. This passage echoes the earlier

⁴ Harvey, Jonathan Lynn, MA. "William Blake: From Antinomian Rebel to Prophet of Healing and Wholeness - Center for Swedenborgian Studies." *Center for Swedenborgian Studies Theological Union* n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

⁵ Harvey, Jonathan Lynn, MA. "William Blake: From Antinomian Rebel to Prophet of Healing and Wholeness - Center for Swedenborgian Studies." *Center for Swedenborgian Studies Theological Union* n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

“proverb of hell” that is “Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion”(Plate 8, Lines 1-2)⁶. Traditionalists enslave and repress the very psychological material that has positive value to moral people of genuine courage.⁷ The courageous few that express their sexual nature outwardly meet salvation in Blake’s eyes, and the “stones of Law” are the “chains...of weak and tame minds”. Written Law causes suffering, and more specifically sexual suffering.⁸

In the third “Memorable Fancy” there is a clear rejection of a religion based on law.⁹ Blake’s motif of the “chain” continues to limit those that limit themselves under religious doctrine. In his third “Memorable Fancy” Blake “[opens] the Bible”(Plate 19, Line 20) and finds that it is a “deep pit”(Plate 19, Line 20). He writes that,

It was a deep pit, into which I descended driving the Angel before me. Soon we saw seven houses of brick, one we enterd; in it were a number of monkeys, baboons, & all of that species chaind by the middle, grinning and snatching at one another, but withheld by the shortness of their chains: however I saw that they sometimes grew numerous, and then the weak were caught by the strong and with a grinning aspect, first couple with & then deveourd, but plucking off one limb and then another till the body was left a helpless trunk. (Plate 19, Lines 20-22/Plate 20, Lines 1-6).¹⁰

The “deep pit” that the speaker enters with the Angel is home to creatures “chaind” by religious law. The creatures struggle to snatch as the others, but are restricted by the “shortness of their chains”. This is the speaker’s vision and trip into the holy document of the Bible, and it seems as if he is in the realm of hell. These animals lack the ability to break free from their limiting

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Harvey, Jonathan Lynn, MA. "William Blake: From Antinomian Rebel to Prophet of Healing and Wholeness - Center for Swedenborgian Studies." *Center for Swedenborgian Studies Theological Union* n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

physical existence because the religious law that they abide by chains them. Antinomianism resonates throughout this passage, as the conventionality behind religion chains figures rather than frees them. In Blake's eyes, salvation can only be achieved once these limiting forces are gone and the imagination that flows from human energies emerges.

The final "Memorable Fancy" invites a relatively new form of Blake's antinomianism into the poem. As Robert Rix writes in "In Infernal Love and Faith: William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*" Blake does affirm his antinomian freedom from the laws of morality, but it "cannot easily be separated from his notion that true believers were under the guidance of the spirit within"(Rix, 110).¹¹ Blake does not wholly reject religion, but rather rejects religion based on written and moral law. He supports that the spirit of Jesus Christ does exist, but does not affirm that following all of Christ's laws will lead to a full and lasting salvation in the afterlife. Blake upholds that,

if Jesus Christ is the greatest man, you ought to love him in the greatest degree; now hear how he has given his sanction to the law of Ten Commandments: did he not mock at the Sabbath, and so mock the Sabbath's God? murder those who were murdered because of him? turn away the law from the woman taken in adultery? steal the labor of others to support him? bear false witness when he omitted making a defence before Pilate?...I tell you, no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments: Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules"(Plate 23, Lines 9-12).

This is a clear rejection of the Ten Commandments in favor of imagination and the expression of human energy.¹² Blake supports that Jesus Christ is a present spirit, but he rejects that even Christ himself followed properly the written laws of God. No "virtue can exist" without straying

¹¹ Rix, Robert W. "IN INFERNAL LOVE AND FAITH': WILLIAM BLAKE'S 'THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL.'" *Literature and Theology*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, pp. 107–125. www.jstor.org/stable/23927291.

¹² Stanger, James. "The Antinomians and the History of Blake Criticism." *Mrbauld.com* (1997): n. pag. *University of California, Riverside*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.

away from these laws, and Blake knows that Christ did not act solely from “rules”. The only way to reach proper and full salvation after death is to live and act “from impulse” just as Blake sees that Christ did. Without the proper expression of our subconscious desires, without an imaginative psychological nature, and without impulsive action humans are “chained” to the written law of the Ten Commandments and limited to a small scope of reality.

Christopher Rowland writes a journal entitled “From impulse not from rules: Blake and Jesus”, and hones in on the psychological limitations of those that act in the reverse: from rules not from impulse. Rowland calls to this specific passage in Plate 23 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and states that Blake presents Jesus as an antinomian and as the pioneer of radical religion who acted ‘from impulse not from rules’.¹³ Blake is alluding to direct gospels within the Bible to accuse Jesus of these impulsive actions. He attacks the gospels of Mark, John and Matthew to challenge the virtuous nature of Jesus Christ. Rowland believes that Jesus “lived by the inspiration of the Spirit and exhibited the kind of religious enthusiasm which was despised by the wise of the world” (Rowland, 192).¹⁴ Blake aligns with Jesus as an antinomian, but also with Jesus on the platform that true salvation is achieved through impulsive action that is produced by the subconscious and not by the formal regulations attached to religious law.

It is difficult to analyze the whole of Blake’s antinomian principles within his deep religious satire of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, but in understanding his theological disputes during the writing of this work, a clear evaluation of the work can be made. Robert W. Rix writes “In Infernal Love and Faith: William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*”, and

¹³ ROWLAND, CHRISTOPHER. “‘From Impulse Not from Rules’: Blake and Jesus.” *Blake and the Bible*, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 181–199, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkssk.16.

¹⁴ Ibid.

summons the relationship between Blake's writing and the poet's dispute with the "mystic philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg" (Rix, 107).¹⁵ Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* can be described as a direct satire of Swedenborg's work, for the philosopher described many visionary journeys to the realms of Heaven and Hell, and wrote on his conversations with angels and devils.¹⁶ He wrote theological books that Blake followed closely, and Blake eventually affirmed his position based upon the thoughts and ideals of Swedenborg under his own specific satirical writing of his journey to the realms of heaven and hell.

Blake includes Swedenborg in the beginning of *Marriage* as he names the philosopher directly. Blake says, "Swedenborg is the Angel sitting at the tomb; his writings are the linen clothes folded up" (Plate 3, Lines 2-3). Blake then speaks of Swedenborg's "volumes [sinking] from the glorious clime" (Plate 20, Lines 14-15). Blake is talking about the philosopher's physical works being in the poet's hands as he continued his journey through heaven and hell. Clearly, Swedenborg has a significant impact on the poet. However, Blake's opposition to the philosopher arises as he claimed that "Swedenborg boasts that what he writes is new: tho' it is only the Contents or Index of already publish'd books" (Plate 21, Lines 4-5). Blake goes on to call the philosopher's work "old falsehoods" (Plate 22, Line 2). So it is clear that Blake did recognize the work and importance of Swedenborg's philosophical assertions; however, Blake certainly denied any direct connection to the author beyond any specific satirical reference.

Blake's antinomianism is a passive denial of the theological sect in which Swedenborg resided. Antinomianism arose in 16th century England alongside two similar sects: the Ranters

¹⁵ Rix, Robert W. "IN INFERNAL LOVE AND FAITH: WILLIAM BLAKE'S 'THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL.'" *Literature and Theology*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, pp. 107-125. www.jstor.org/stable/23927291.

¹⁶ Ibid.

and the Muggletonians.¹⁷ Rix writes, “Blake shared the belief that Christ had abolished the Moral Law *universally* for all humankind. This meant that humans were freed from the obligation to *justify* themselves by submitting to Moral Law; *Faith* was sufficient for salvation”(Rix, 109).¹⁸ Swedenborg claimed “Love and Wisdom was communicated to us through ‘divine influx’ into the spirit”(Rix, 110).¹⁹ This idea directly challenges Blake’s denial of law and morality being intertwined. Swedenborg saw ‘influx’ as a guiding mechanism for human behavior and conduct.²⁰ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* largely opposes this ‘divine influx’ presented by Swedenborg, and affirms antinomianism within the work.

Blake takes a unique antinomian stance, even unconventional for other antinomians. He supports, as Jon Mee states in “Is there an Antinomian in the House? William Blake and the After-Life of Heresy”, a quickening of the spirit over the letter of law.²¹ However, Blake supports a rather passive version of this theological position that promises absolute and unconditional forgiveness for what is still recognized as sin.²² Mee argues that Blake was not the only, or final, antinomian to emerge and it is because of this passive version of antinomianism that he relates to others on his rejection of the Decalogue and written religious law. Mee also presents William Huntington’s theory of “anticlericalism” from his publication *The Utility of Books*. Anticlericalism has a “distinctly antinomian emphasis on the misguided attachment of the

¹⁷ Rix, Robert W. “‘IN INFERNAL LOVE AND FAITH’: WILLIAM BLAKE’S ‘THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL.’” *Literature and Theology*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2006, pp. 107–125. www.jstor.org/stable/23927291.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Mee, Jon. "Is There an Antinomian in the House? William Blake and the After-Life of Heresy." *Historicizing Blake*. By S. H. Clark and David Worrall. Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1994. 43-55. Print.

²² *Ibid.*

clergy to the letter over the spirit: ‘Satan has furnished the world with ministers who revile the Gospel and cry up the law’”(Mee, 46).²³ It is clear that Blake was not the last antinomian, but his followers and later poets and writers built upon his principles. His antinomianism is clear throughout *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and seen in the later works by other poets.

Blake rejected moral law and the Ten Commandments; however, his alignment with antinomianism in the sixteenth century created a different form of salvation. Blake desired a human existence that challenged repression of desires and a suppression of sensual enjoyment. Without these two things naturally being expressed, man becomes “chained” to the limitations set upon him by Biblical doctrine. The Decalogue created guidelines that Blake saw as limiting and harmful to a true spiritual and bodily salvation in life and death. So, the poet proposed an imaginative human life that focused on the “Poetic Genius” and manifestation of all human energies—both good and evil. Human life is not to be bound by repression, but rather to be fully open to all experiences so that both the physical body and the psychological spirit can meet whole salvation in death.

²³ Huntington, William. *The Utility of the Books and the Excellency of the Parchments ; Being the Substance of a Sermon Delivered at Providence Chapel, on Wednesday, March 9, 1796 ; ... By William Huntington, S.S. ..* London: Printed by T. Bensley. Sold at Providence Chapel, and at Monkwell-Street Meeting, 1796. Print.

