

# Anarchism and William Blake's Idea of Jesus

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The English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827) left a body of breathtaking art and stirring, sometimes obscure poetry, much of it concerned with religion and much with the revolutionary struggles of his time—the American and French revolutions, the British radical movement of the 1790s, and later, the growing British labor and constitutional movement in the years 1810-1820. Blake's major poems—which are also beautiful artworks incorporating his own illustrations—include those collected in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789-1794); short narrative works like *The Book of Urizen*, *America a Prophecy*, and *Europe a Prophecy*, all written in the 1790s; and three long, complex narrative poems, *The Four Zoas* (1797-1807), *Milton* (1804-1818), and *Jerusalem* (1804-1820). This article is about Blake's idea of Jesus and its relation to revolutionary anarchism.

What (a skeptical reader might ask) is an article about Jesus doing in a “Journal of Anarchism and Libertarian Socialism”? The most obvious answer is that an incomparably greater number of people live their lives—or try to—according to some idea of what Jesus thought, than according to any idea of what anarchists, Marxists, or socialists have thought. Besides this fact, Blake's idea of Jesus contains his answers to questions about how to create and live in a free society that are crucial for anarchists—and decent Marxists and socialists—but which none of those groups has answered very well.

To anticipate what I will say later, Blake answers Marxists and those influenced by Marxism by saying, straight up front, that a new world is not predestined by an inevitable historical process (in Blake's terms, a divine plan) and can't be created by a revolutionary minority or a benevolent state. It can only be created by the majority of the people, and only if they are inspired by ethics, love, and mutual self-sacrifice, what Blake calls “Mysterious / Offering of Self for Another” (*Jerusalem* 96:20-21).<sup>1</sup> Blake's relevance for anarchists is a little different. His belief in a self-regulating community entirely without government and his rejection of dictatorship are anarchist beliefs. But his Christianity is very un-anarchist, at least traditionally. Haven't anarchists always been hostile to the kind of passivity, otherworldliness, and reliance on transcendent authority that we associate with Christianity? But Blake's Christianity is very different. In

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<sup>1</sup> Blake's works are quoted from David V. Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1988). The numbers stand for Blake's pages and lines; slash marks show line breaks. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are Blake's.

particular, his view of Jesus is exactly what he has to offer to anarchists, as well as libertarians in general.

Anarchists believe in a community of brotherhood/sisterhood much like that of supposed early Christian communities, but they have rejected religion as the glue to hold such a community together. They believe, instead, that with the destruction of the state and oppressive classes, unchained human desire can create and uphold this communal society. Blake's understanding, on the contrary, is that to do so requires the mutual love and even faith that he sums up in his idea of Jesus. Anarchists interested in the problem of how to create and sustain a free society don't need to embrace religion or Blake's idea of Jesus, but they need to understand what the latter contributes that traditional anarchist thought doesn't.

Blake's idea of Jesus also offers answers to several more specific political problems. One is the question of why there should be a revolution at all. I am not talking about issues such as what kind of organizations and armed forces are necessary. Rather, the question is why millions of people should be willing to work their whole lives through, and if necessary sacrifice their lives, for an ideal that may never be realized. Marxists have tended to answer this question through faith in the inevitability of socialism/communism; anarchists have assumed that the fires of revolt are always smoldering beneath the dampers of social convention and state repression. (I realize I am oversimplifying, even caricaturing, both anarchist and Marxist thinking on these issues, but I believe this sketch does identify real tendencies in their thought.) These answers are not very satisfactory. We know from experience that in severe crises people have often turned to fascism, racism, totalitarian-Marxist statism, or religious passivity for solutions. Not only privileged workers and middle-class people, but oppressed workers as well, have done so. People aren't naturally antiauthoritarian any more than they are destined to recognize their assumed class interests.

Another problem is how disagreements will be handled in a future society. Again I am not referring to specifics, like how cooperatives would be organized, but to more basic questions. Why, in the long run, would cooperative and equalitarian ways of living win out over competitiveness, racism, sexual oppression? How would a free society manage disagreement over both practical questions and principles without a coercive government? Marxists have assumed that an all-powerful state party will settle these questions until an unspecified transition to stateless communism; anarchists, in contrast, have felt that no real problems will arise—cooperation at least in large matters will be natural once the state is gone. Again, these are not very satisfying answers.

Blake's answers are different. To the first question—why anyone would struggle for a total change in society—Blake answers through his prophet-figure, Los, that love will motivate the necessary extremes of self-sacrifice and devotion, if anything will: "I can at will expatiate in the Gardens of bliss; / But pangs of love draw me down to my loins ... / ... O Albion! my brother! / Corruptibility appears upon thy limbs, and never more / Can I arise and leave thy side" (*Jerusalem* 82:82-83:2). Blake's response to the second issue is that society will manage itself through open debate, if people can cleanse themselves of the spiritual and mental deformations of their previous lives. Blake's idea of Jesus plays a part in answering how each of these processes could happen.

To understand Blake's conception of Jesus, and how it can speak to us in very different times from his own, a little background is necessary. Blake came of age in a revolutionary period that was also a time of popular apocalyptic religion. The American Revolution began when Blake was eighteen. He and most British radicals supported the Americans—just as, two hundred years later, U.S. radicals supported the Vietnamese in the Vietnam war. Blake was thirty-two when the French

Revolution started; again, most British radicals backed the revolutionary cause, and Blake with them. For most of Blake's middle age England was at war with France (1792-1815), first in a war of intervention against the French republic and then in an interimperialist struggle with Napoleonic France. Blake saw the war, at least in its later phase, as a Satanic conspiracy by England together with France, perpetrated by "Congregated Assemblies of wicked men" (the British parliament, among others), "in union blasphemous / Against the divine image" (for Blake, the human form—men, and boys as young as twelve, in the armies and navies of both countries). (*The Four Zoas* 104:29-30) In Blake's sixties, the British government murdered eleven unarmed demonstrators, and wounded over four hundred, in the "Peterloo" massacre (Aug. 16, 1819). The power of "Satan" seemed limitless. But Blake believed deeply that one day Albion, his personification of the British people, would plunge into the "Furnaces of Affliction"—real workplaces, as well as metaphors for human suffering—and rouse his "Cities & Counties" to disperse the clouds of tyranny and oppression. (*Jerusalem* 96:35, 33)

At the height of the English radical movement of the 1790s, which left an indelible impression on Blake's writings, London boiled with agitation against the government and monarchy and with every kind of social and religious speculation. In the alehouses that provided, in historian Iain McCalman's words, a "social borderland of the respectable and the rough ... plebeian counterparts of Voltaire's salons—London's real republic of letters," one might debate politics, religion, or both, or join in singing John Thelwall's "A Sheep-shearing Song," which explained

How shepherds shear their silly sheep,  
How statesmen shear the state ...<sup>2</sup>

Religion was central to left-wing politics. At a time before knowledge of evolution or the earth's geological age, educated and uneducated people alike believed the world had been created four thousand years before Christ and would end two thousand years after—in the relatively near, perhaps immediate, future. To many radical supporters of France, its revolution was the beginning of the apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelation and other prophecies. We need to understand that this belief in apocalypse was hopeful. "Apoc-alyptse" meant not universal destruction but the downfall of Satan's kingdom on earth and the beginning of Jesus'. Violent as this process might be, it would lead to a new world in which "God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes" (Rev. 21:4). Pamphlets argued that the war with France was "the great War in the Revelations, by which this Government [the English] was to be overturned" and that the allied monarchies of England, France, Prussia, and Russia were the four beasts of Daniel 7. Radicals steeped in bible texts read that "Babylon the great has fallen, has fallen" (Rev. 18:2) and thought of King George's England. Prophet Richard Brothers believed the Jews would soon be restored to Jerusalem, God's city on earth; he included not only professing Jews but "invisible" Hebrews, the people of England, who would thus be freed from William Pitt's government.<sup>3</sup> So Blake was not alone in applying religion to politics; but he was unusual in the depth of his political and religious radicalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Iain McCalman, "The Infidel as Prophet: William Reid and Blakean Radicalism," in *Historicizing Blake*, ed. Steve Clark, David Worrall (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 31-32; John Thelwall, "A Sheepshearing Song," in *Poetry and Reform: Periodical Verse from the English Democratic Press, 1792-1824*, ed. Michael Scrivener (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992), 115.

<sup>3</sup> J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1979), 31, 65, 61-62.

Most people who have read any Blake, such as the early *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, realize that his poetry is socially critical. In longer works, Blake develops his vision of social liberation, as in these lines from *America a Prophecy*:

Let the slave grinding at the mill, run out into the field: Let him look up into the heavens & laugh in the bright air; Let the chained soul shut up in darkness and in sighing, Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years; Rise and look out, his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open. And let his wife and children return from the oppressors scourge; They look behind at every step & believe it is a dream... For Empire is no more, and now the Lion & Wolf shall cease. (6:6-15)

These poems are often hard for a new reader. Instead of taking over the ready-made mythologies of biblical heroes and Greek-Roman gods that many poets used in their works, Blake invented a mythology of his own. He didn't provide a key for it, either. So the reader meets characters such as Los, Urizen, or the "shadowy daughter of Urthona" without any explanation. Moreover, characters mutate without warning and have multiple, overlapping symbolic roles. But with some patience, the reader will become familiar with the characters and what they represent. Those I have referred to so far include Los, Blake's prophet, who is a blacksmith and therefore also stands for labor in human history; Urizen, who is slavemaster, monarch, repressive father, and Old Testament god, among other roles; and Albion, personification not just of the British people—Albion is an old poetic name for England—but of all humanity. So, in the quotation earlier, Los, as a figure of prophecy and as the working class, is saying he cannot think only of his own well-being because love draws him to make common cause with the suffering and corrupted people. Blake's readers will also meet Orc, who speaks the prophecy above. Orc embodies the French and American revolutions, rebellion throughout history, (male) sexual liberation, opposition to religious law, and several related ideas.

Orc is Blake's main agent of liberation in *America* and other early narrative poems. Bound in chains at the beginning of *America*, he snaps the chains, rapes the daughter of Urthona (earthowner—Blake uses puns a lot), and then appears as flames of revolt sweeping from America to England. The flames are doused at the end of the American war but spring up again twelve years later—in 1793, twelve years after the British surrender at Yorktown and the year Louis XVI was beheaded in France. So Orc stands for violent rebellion.

The broader principles Orc represents are summed up in another early work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

Energy is the only life and is from the Body & Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy ...

Energy is Eternal Delight.

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling. (*Marriage*, pages 4-5)

Blake at first saw unchecked desire—political, social, psychic, and sexual—as the key to liberation. Orc, or suppressed energy, will free himself by breaking the chains of repression and then liberate others by crossing the Atlantic as an uncontrolled fire of rebellion. Blake already

knew things weren't so simple—Orc's flames are damped for twelve years—but essentially he believed in energy's power to break through restraint. As part of this attitude, he didn't believe in any code of ethics, even among the oppressed—Orc's rape of the daughter is seen as liberating the imprisoned energies of nature. Blake assumed that when everyone expresses desire freely, all will live in harmony. Readers may recognize in these ideas a similarity to some kinds of anarchist thought.

Blake ultimately came to change this emphasis on pure desire. Some of the events that influenced him were the failure of the French Revolution—both the cruelty of the Jacobin Terror and the triumph of the Napoleonic state; the decline of the English radical movement of the 1790s; the support of most of the British common people for the war of 1792-1815; and, later, the anti-homosexual violence of London mobs who assembled in thousands to assault prisoners convicted in raids on gay establishments in 1810-1811. All these events underlined the possibility of harnessing repressed popular energies for persecution and war. It is true that these were not truly autonomous expressions of desire, and perhaps an anarchist would reply that only such autonomous expressions can be liberating. But Blake was also aware that nothing in society can be autonomous in the sense of being free from influence by past history, ideology, and the teachings of various elites. (This, whatever its other faults, is the value of Lenin's argument for explicit socialist politics and against "spontaneity" in *What Is To Be Done?*) The result was that in his later works Blake stopped presenting the liberation of desire, alone, as sufficient for human liberation.

But neither did Blake—like ex-radicals of his own and later times—decide that the aim of liberating desire was wrong, that untrammelled desire itself led to excesses of violence and hatred, or that society needed an authority principle to restrain the people. Instead, Blake showed that pure or instinctual desire, without a larger vision of human solidarity, could be captured and perverted by authoritarian ideas and political forces, and turned into a lust for power. In the central crisis of his long poem *The Four Zoas*, which is both a universal history of civilization and a dramatization of contemporary events, Blake shows Orc tempted by Urizen with power over the masses—in other words, over a portion of himself. Orc divides into an oppressive serpent—Napoleonic France—and a "howling" boy chained "in the deeps" (*The Four Zoas* 85:22, 90:46)—Orc's original form, the oppressed people.

Now, in a movement "back to basics," Blake began emphasize the need for deep historical awareness, voluntary ethical commitments, and a belief in universal human brotherhood to guide, and even make possible, the liberation of desire. At the same time Blake began dramatizing and criticizing other assumptions of the French revolutionaries and the English radicals of the time—among them the idea of an enlightened leadership that could guide the people to freedom without their own conscious participation; the assumption that one liberating voice could speak for all the people; and the belief that the moment of liberation (in Blake's biblical terms, of apocalypse) was determined by God and knowable in advance. All these ideas, readers will realize, have equivalents in later revolutionary thought, particularly Marxism.

At the center of Blake's new concept of liberation, as the inspiration of universal brotherhood, is the figure of Jesus. Blake's Jesus is not the greater-than-human son of God, humanity's redeemer and judge, of authoritarian Christianity. Borrowing and building on lower-class radical Christian traditions that he was steeped in as a child—best explored in E. P. Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*<sup>4</sup>—Blake makes Jesus a man, a comrade in

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<sup>4</sup> New York: New Press, 1993.

suffering, ready to die for his fellow humans. And, literally, Jesus is all humans, when they are able to live in love and mutual self-sacrifice.

Blake had already expressed this idea of God or Jesus in early poems, such as “The Divine Image” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789):

To Mercy Pity Peace and Love All pray in their distress: And to these virtues of delight Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love Is God our father dear: And Mercy Pity Peace and Love, Is Man his child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart Pity, a human face: And Love, the human form divine, And Peace, the human dress.

Then every man of every clime, That prays in his distress, Prays to the human form divine Love Mercy Pity Peace.

Then all must love the human form, In heathen, turk or jew. Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell, There God is dwelling too.

This wonderful poem, even though it is very simple, needs to be read very carefully and absolutely literally to be understood. Our own learned responses inherited from authoritarian religion tell us what Blake “must” mean: mercy, pity, peace and love are divine qualities, and, inspired by God, they are found in humans too; God’s mercy is expressed in human acts. That is *not* what Blake is saying. He says that people *pray* to mercy, pity, peace, and love—human virtues; that these virtues *are* God; that therefore everyone who prays is praying *to* the human form; and that the divine image *is* “the human form, / In heathen, turk or jew.” God and Jesus, for Blake, are humanity, when and where it can live by these virtues. In a later essay, Blake refers simply to “man or humanity, who is Jesus the Saviour” (*A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*, in Erdman, *Poetry and Prose* 536). Similarly, Satan is humanity when it does not live by those virtues; Satan is individual cruelty, sexual and moral hypocrisy, and, as I mentioned above, human institutional oppression, “Congregated Assemblies of wicked men.”

The ideas in “The Divine Image” have many implications. One is that since we pray to “the human form divine,” the human body, therefore the body, and its sexuality, are holy; Love has “the human form.” This belief led Blake from an initial emphasis on male sexual gratification to an eventual belief in women’s autonomy and a defense of homosexuality. But my main emphasis here will be on the directly political aspects of his belief.

Blake eventually made the idea of a human, collective Jesus the key to his idea of liberation. In *Jerusalem*, a late work, Albion, Blake’s mythic figure for the British people and humanity in general, has turned away “from Universal Love,” raging “with loud / Thunders of deadly war (the fever of the human soul)” —a fairly direct reference to the continent-wide war. As he turns away,

mild the Saviour follow’d him, Displaying the Eternal Vision! the Divine Similitude!  
In loves and tears of brothers, sisters, sons, fathers, and friends Which if Man ceases  
to behold, he ceases to exist: Saying. Albion! Our wars are wars of life, & wounds  
of love, With intellectual spears, & long winged arrows of thought: Mutual in one  
another’s love and wrath all renewing We live as One Man; for contracting our infi-  
nite senses We behold multitude; or expanding: we behold as one. As One Man all

the Universal Family; and that One Man We call Jesus the Christ: and he in us, and we in him, Live in perfect harmony in Eden the land of life, Giving, receiving, and forgiving each others trespasses. He is the Good shepherd, he is the Lord and master: He is the Shepherd of Albion, he is all in all, In Eden: in the garden of God: and in heavenly Jerusalem. If we have offended, forgive us, take not vengeance against us. Thus speaking; the Divine Family follow Albion; I see them in the Vision of God upon my pleasant valleys. (*Jerusalem* 34:10-28)

Blake means exactly what he says. The Saviour is a human group, “We,” who “live as One Man,” as “One Man all the Universal Family; and that One Man / We call Jesus the Christ.” Jesus is the universal family. He and his members, the Divine Family, promise the war-maddened Albion a different kind of war, that of intellect and love. (Blake never believed in Marxist utopia’s artificial unanimity; he wanted a new society filled with cultural and intellectual confrontation resolved through debate, without institutional hierarchy.) Blake’s Jesus, then, is humanity when it is united by love.

But this Jesus is not some weak idea of humanitarian benevolence. He has the full force of traditional religious belief. He is humanity’s guardian or shepherd. But he is human and collective: “he [One Man all the Universal Family] in us, and we in him, / Live in perfect harmony in Eden the land of life”; “He [One Man all the Universal Family] is the Good shepherd, he is the Lord and master: / He is the Shepherd of Albion, he is all in all, / In Eden: in the garden of God.”

Moreover, even though “the Saviour” follows Albion (line 10), he/it speaks “In loves and tears of brothers, sisters, sons, fathers, and friends” (line 12), and at the end of the speech the speaker is said to be “the Divine Family” (line 27). All of these are the same. Jesus or the Saviour is the Divine Family and the Divine Family is the loves and tears of real human families and friends. In his late poetry Blake often interchanges human and divine terms in this way, underlining the human meaning of Jesus and God. Later in *Jerusalem*, for example, the “Divine Vision” sings a song of oppression and endurance; the poem’s narrator closes by saying, “This is the Song of the Lamb, sung by Slaves in evening time” (*Jerusalem* 60:5, 38). We must be careful not to assume that Blake means slaves’ songs are like the divine vision; he is saying slaves’ songs are the divine vision and the song of the Lamb (that is, Jesus); Jesus is slaves singing of freedom. In *Milton*, another late poem, Los speaks to his sons of continuing their work of redemption because “We were plac’d here by the Universal Brotherhood & Mercy” (*Milton* 23:50). Blake is not, as we might assume, using “Universal Brotherhood & Mercy” as a poetic way of saying “Jesus” or “God”—or, rather, he is saying this, but in his own way: Los and his sons were placed here by universal brotherhood and mercy; that is what Jesus is.

Blake’s Jesus, then, is humanity, when humanity is able to “expand” its senses and “behold as one, / As One Man all the Universal Family.” The point is worth underlining. Blake does not say that humanity “ceases to exist” when it loses sight of some transcendent divinity—but when it ceases to behold “loves and tears of brothers, sisters, sons, fathers, and friends.” The Divine Similitude is seen in their loves and tears, and only there. In fact, one way to read Blake’s words is that the brothers, sisters, and friends are Jesus—they are a family and he too is a family.

More specifically, Jesus or God is those who labor in the “Furnaces of Affliction.” These furnaces stand for humanity’s suffering throughout history, for the industrial workplaces of Blake’s day, and, also, for the struggles against poverty and tyranny in the years when *Jerusalem* was written, 1804 to 1820; different descriptions throughout *Jerusalem* make all these meanings clear.

The furnaces are the places where the struggle for redemption occurs (and where unspeakable suffering takes place), and the laborers therefore are God or Jesus struggling for redemption. Blake indicates this by interchanging human and divine terms in the way I have just explained. First Los speaks: “Yet why despair! I saw the finger of God go forth / Upon my Furnaces, from within the wheels of Albions Sons: / ... / God is within, & without! he is even in the depths of Hell!” Then the poem’s narrator says that the laborers have been speaking, and that they are where Los said God’s finger was and are doing what it did: “Such were the lamentations of the Labourers in the Furnaces! / And they appeared within & without incircling on both sides / The Starry Wheels of Albions Sons, with Spaces for Jerusalem” (*Jerusalem* 12:10-18).<sup>5</sup> The laborers, when they truly work to redeem humanity, are God or Jesus.

So, when Blake’s apocalypse, which is also a social uprising, takes place at the end of *Jerusalem*, it begins in the furnaces and is inspired by Jesus. Albion, the British people, who has been shown as dead or asleep through most of the poem, has awakened and is talking to Jesus as the clouds of oppression and falsehood threaten to engulf them. Jesus, Blake says, is “the Lord the Universal Humanity” and is willing to die for Albion: “This is Friendship & Brotherhood without it Man Is Not” (*Jerusalem* 96:5, 16). As the clouds divide him from Jesus, Albion cries out:

Do I sleep amidst danger to Friends! O my Cities & Counties Do you sleep! rouse up!  
rouse up. Eternal Death is abroad So Albion spoke & threw himself into the Furnaces  
of affliction All was a Vision, all a Dream: the Furnaces became Fountains of Living  
Waters flowing from the Humanity Divine And all the Cities of Albion rose from  
their Slumbers, and All The Sons & Daughters of Albion on soft clouds Waking from  
Sleep Soon all around remote the Heavens burnt with flaming fires ... (96:33-40)

The rebellion clearly begins in the furnaces, is made through Albion’s appeal to his “Cities & Counties,” and is successful because the furnaces throw up “Fountains of Living Waters.” The uprising-apocalypse, then, is an insurrectionary mass movement, based in places of production. Albion’s descent is an appeal for collective action, and it is an act of public organizing. (The idea of the waking people and the phrases “rouse up! rouse up!” are taken from contemporary handbills appealing for mass action.) Most of all, the uprising is inspired by Jesus’ example of fraternal self-sacrifice: “Albion stood in terror: not for himself but for his Friend / Divine” (lines 30-31). At the same time, writing probably during the social crisis leading up to Peterloo in 1819, or even afterward, Blake does not make clear whether the uprising-apocalypse is violent or not. The narrative skips over whatever events “Soon” set the heavens on fire. Blake, who had earlier believed quite firmly in violent revolution (“the strife of blood”—*Europe* 15:15), apparently now hoped for a nonviolent revolt, but left the question open. Many radicals of the time, such as Percy Shelley, had similar positions.

The idea that the real working class can act to save humanity under the impulse of universal fraternity can only be called a faith. It isn’t Blake’s idea alone, of course. Millions have had it, though they have not usually expressed its religious qualities so directly as Blake. Marxism is, in fact, a version of this faith. But, while his idea has clear affinities with Marxism, Blake differs

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<sup>5</sup> Albion’s renegade sons and daughters play oppressive roles throughout *Jerusalem*; here, the “wheels” are those of industry, war, and the present universe as a whole. *Jerusalem*, in traditional biblical uses, is the city of God, and here, also a woman character who is sexually oppressed, so the “Spaces for Jerusalem” are spaces for future redemption and free sexuality.



from Marx in two crucial ways. He does not derive the laborers' redemptive role from automatic processes growing from economic struggle, but rather from an ideal of solidarity to which Blake gives the name Jesus; and he stresses self-sacrifice as central to fulfilling this role.

So Blake works out an idea that society may be saved by its own oppressed people, workers and others, which is similar to what Marxists and anarchists believe. But to explain how this salvation can occur, he needs the figure of Jesus, understood as "One Man all the Universal Family" or "the Universal Brotherhood & Mercy." Blake is not just translating religious ideas into social terms. Nor is he substituting religion for social struggle. He is trying to express the sense of self-sacrificing mutuality and universal love that are needed to create a free society and to sustain it. And he is also trying to inspire his readers to struggle for such a society by appealing to an idea of Jesus that they carry within them, while encouraging them to expand this conception.

There is no trickery in any of this. Blake calls universal brotherhood Jesus because this form of fraternity is a higher kind of existence than we experience in most of our lives, and because some idea of the possibility of rising above ordinary experience—some idea of the divine—is required to make this kind of mutualism possible.

Several additional, related points come from Blake's idea of apocalypse as a mass-democratic uprising inspired by mutual love. First, the apocalypse-uprising cannot be predicted or foretold with any certainty, because it depends on Albion's waking and his readiness to follow Jesus' example. (If he were not ready to do this, he would descend into competitiveness and oppression—in Blake's terms, he would "die" again.) This idea is opposed to the Marxist belief that an objective historical pattern determines the maturing of the means of production and their human component, the working class. In a passage I already quoted in part, Los tells his sons:

We were plac'd here by the Universal Brotherhood & Mercy With powers fitted to circumscribe this dark Satanic death ... But how this is as yet we know not, and we cannot know; Till Albion is arisen; then patient wait a little while, Six Thousand years are passd away the end approaches fast (*Milton* 23:50-55)

Furthermore, because the apocalypse-uprising depends on Albion, it also cannot be foisted on him. At one point in *Jerusalem*, Los and the "Friends of Albion" make an attempt to save Albion by coercion: "They Albion surround with kindest violence to bear him back / Against his will thro Los's Gate to Eden." The result is a disaster: Albion resists, the universe grows dark, and the friends have to abandon the attempt (*Jerusalem* 39:2-17). Fairly clearly, Blake is attacking the French Revolution's use of dictatorship for revolutionary aims. He is also attacking contemporary English conceptions of coup d'état and a conspiratorial provisional government—in these years there were several attempts at conspiratorial uprisings, actions aimed at sparking popular revolt which, because of their unrepresentative character, had the opposite effect. Clearly, too, Blake's criticism also applies to later ideas of revolution by benevolent elites. In contrast, at a later point in *Jerusalem*, "those who disregard all Mortal Things," a kind of divine council, debate whether to appoint protectors to guard humanity in its struggles, and decide not to: "Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones, / And those who are in misery cannot remain so long / If we but do our duty: labour well the teeming Earth" (*Jerusalem* 55:1, 51-53). The new society, then, will be built by patient human labor in which we ready ourselves for the day of struggle.

Additionally, it will be based on the free debate Blake calls "intellectual war." After the apocalypse-uprising near the end of *Jerusalem*, the universe becomes a jumble of contending

voices: “And they conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic which bright / Redounded from their Tongues ... / ... creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect / ... throughout all the Three Regions immense / Of Childhood, Manhood & Old Age” (Jerusalem 98:28-33). Blake rejects the idea of a revolutionary authority that can lead Albion to Eden, and the related idea that all will speak with one voice after a revolution-apocalypse. Instead, humanity as a whole, conversing “in Visionary forms dramatic,” will (Blake hopes) remake the universe through open dialogue.

Blake also sees that to keep this system working—even to get it to work—requires a kind of spiritual cleansing after the apocalypse-revolution. One action Blake’s awakened “zoas,” or human forms and populations, take after the heavens are lit on fire is to slay “The Druid Spectre” (Jerusalem 98:6). “Spectres,” in Blake’s poetry, are deformed kinds of thought and action, and he particularly associated Druidism with war and capital punishment. So apparently achieving a liberated society requires a struggle for the spiritual health of the workers and common people after a successful uprising. This idea can be extended farther than Blake (at the end of his poem) takes it: the struggle must be continuous, or the spectres will reassert themselves and society will degenerate into competitiveness, oppression and war.

Most daringly, in earlier episodes of Jerusalem, Blake rejects the conception of human perfectibility that most radical traditions have embraced; man, he says, “is born a Spectre or Satan & is altogether an Evil” (page 52, prose section). Against the radical orthodoxy of his time and ours, Blake believed in human sinfulness. This belief was partly a matter of humanity and realism; the sixty-year-old Blake had lived long enough to know how much we can hurt one another. Aside from this aspect, Blake’s belief in imperfection, paradoxically enough, was a key to his idea of a nonauthoritarian society.

This part of his thinking is complex but truly rewarding. The idea of perfectibility is still deeply embedded in radical thought. But since clearly people are not perfect now, the belief leads, almost insensibly, to the concept of remoulding the common people from above, during a transitional period in which they shed competitive, racist, and similar beliefs; only then do they become truly capable of running the beautiful society that has been built for them. The idea of perfectibility further involves hostility to people’s ordinary culture and beliefs, and a compromise (at best) with the idea of a government of guardians. In a modern form, such as Che Guevara’s “new socialist man,” the idea of perfectibility has many attractive aspects; it argues that capitalist values are not necessarily humanity’s ruling qualities. But it is inseparable from the conception that an already perfected or partly-perfected leadership will hold power and remould human character from above. In this way, the desire for a suprahuman perfection becomes the basis for usurping power. Blake knew such regimes from England’s religious history and its earlier revolutionary period in the seventeenth century under Cromwell, as well as from the recent French Revolution. In place of the French “republic of Virtue,” which led to vesting supreme power in virtue’s guardians, Blake offered the idea of continual forgiveness of sins, as in the passage about the Divine Family quoted earlier. By implication, if there is continual forgiveness of sin, the ideological justification for a hierarchy of social guardians vanishes, a crucial step in convincing people to abolish the hierarchies in reality.

All these episodes exemplify the independent role of utopian values in Blake. These values may be taken as religious, spiritual, or ethical—depending on how one regards them. For Blake they are certainly religious. But in any case they are not mere reflections of an underlying deeper level of reality, either in the Marxist sense of derivation from a dialectical historical scheme or

in the sense supplied by Blake's intellectual tradition, that of accordance with a divine plan. And they are not simply expressions of unfettered desire, as in early Blake and some kinds of anarchist thought; they are conscious and collective. The values of love and fraternity, especially in the sense of devotion to universal humanity, correspond to Blake's beliefs about the nature of Jesus, and this Jesus is immanent in humanity. But he is present as humanity's own capacities for comradeship and persuasion, not an overriding suprahuman principle; the Saviour says to Albion at the beginning of Jerusalem, "I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend" (4:18). Humanity's response to its own potential to unify in love (to become Jesus) is therefore motivated by love, not obedience to higher authority. And the response is a free one, not a simple recognition of necessity; Blake's view contrasts to the Marxist idea (taken from Hegel) of freedom as the understanding of necessity. Love, not necessity, draws Los to Albion's side when he is free to "expatiate in the Gardens of bliss," and terror "for his Friend / Divine" leads Albion to plunge into the furnaces (Jerusalem 82:82, 96:30-31).

These spiritual-ethical values and the explicit utopianism of the apocalyptic pages in America, The Four Zoas, and Jerusalem become Blake's means of bridging the gap between Albion's and Los's present consciousness and the consciousness that can create an apocalypse. Blake envisions this consciousness growing through an increasing brotherhood and tolerance—"What is Liberty without Universal Toleration," Blake asks in his annotations to Henry Boyd's notes on Dante (Erdman, Poetry and Prose 635). As just noted, he also believes we must reject the false "Heaven" of moral perfection (Jerusalem 49:27), and must value and forgive imperfect human beings. These values of conscious ethics and love are an alternative to the Marxist idea of historical inevitability; Blake, of course, knew nothing of Marxism, but was familiar with similar conceptions in the politics of the French Revolution, English radicalism, and his own Christian apocalyptic tradition.

This emphasis on utopian values is also, perhaps, an alternative to anarchist ideas of spontaneity. People do not possess these values now, except in embryonic forms that (importantly) often come from an ethical, common-people's Christianity of tolerance and forgiveness. But when we have these values, we will be able to create and maintain a free society. Finally, these values also contrast with Marx's derivation of freedom from material relations (see Ron Tabor's discussion of Marx, in this issue). Rather than believing that a transformed society and culture will grow insensibly from transformed social relations, which is more or less Marx's idea, Blake argues that reconceiving culture through brotherhood and "Mysterious / Offering of Self for Another" is necessary to transform material social relations at all.

Blake's emphasis on ethical and spiritual values is also related to his idea of a post-apocalyptic world of freedom and debate, without government. This conception raises a crucial problem found in many revolutionary theories: how can there be free, democratic politics in a post-revolutionary society without the possibility that class and political oppression will reemerge? This issue is not just a matter of how to treat a small class of former exploiters; it involves the free speech and other political and social rights of ordinary people. This is so, first, because the exploiters inevitably have millions of supporters who are tied materially or by belief to their system of rule; and second, because ideas of individual acquisitiveness, class, racial, and sexual superiority, etc., are shared in varying degrees by supporters of the new system. Marxism tries to deal with this issue through Marx's formula that the new society will be "economically, morally and

intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.”<sup>6</sup> Blake, however, is more frank in facing the problem of the deep internalization of oppressive values, and his concerns with psychic division and sexual deformation and their relations to social oppression give a lot more scope for understanding the problem. But in any case, the persistence of such tendencies means there can be no free speech and organization without the possibility of a reemergence of oppression.

One classic Marxist response to this issue calls (in theory) for freedom for all political and social views “within the revolution.” The Maoist formulation of the same idea is that “non-antagonistic contradictions among the people” will be allowed while views that are against the revolution, or “antagonistic contradictions,” will be repressed. But these ideas depend on an authority with the power to decide which views are “within the revolution” or “nonantagonistic.” They are meaningless without a ruling party that holds all power in its own hands.

Blake’s response, in contrast, is to rely on the active force of brotherhood and love to make full freedom possible without the reemergence of oppression. In this conception, the conscious commitment of a large enough group of people to cooperative forms of social organization and to fraternal political and social relations—cemented by the religious idea of a humanized Jesus—would be sufficient to allow open political debate and organization to occur without acquisitive and oppressive behavior becoming dominant. No doubt this idea can be called naïve. But it is not necessarily more naïve than Marxists’ assumption that an elite with unlimited power can rule in the interests of the common people, or the present-day liberal capitalist idea that a social system designed to maximize capital growth can produce a free and prosperous life for all. In any case, Blake’s focus on the spiritual and ethical life of the working class or common people is not just important as an alternative to traditional left-wing disinterest in religion and ethics, but is the key to his belief in an apocalypse that brings a society of mutual rights, a cooperative commonwealth of free women and men without government. And Blake’s conception of the spiritual-ethical beliefs needed for such a society is worth study by those who share this goal.

Besides these directly political points, Blake’s ideas are important in a more general way because of what they imply about the independent roles of religion and art as ways of viewing society. This is a point that both the anarchist and Marxist traditions have been slow to understand. At worst, left-wing thought has been actively hostile to religious belief—not just religious hierarchies—and indifferent to art. At best—and it is a poor best—Marxism has adopted art as a kind of poor cousin needing some education and manners. E. P. Thompson, the great English historian deeply influenced by Blake, captures this point perfectly in his study of William Morris, a utopian thinker and socialist organizer with his own similarities to Blake. Criticizing the way Marxist writers have dealt with Morris’s utopian writings, Thompson comments, “What one notes is a certain tendency to intellectualise art, and to insist that it can be validated only when translated into terms of knowledge, consciousness, and concept: art is seen, not as an enactment of values, but as a re-enactment in different terms of theory.”<sup>7</sup> This Marxist conception ultimately argues that only an intricate theory, understood by its own advocates, is capable of guiding humanity; the other ways of thinking that people use to evaluate reality and comment on society—such as religion and art—are not capable of arriving at truth, but only of approximat-

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<sup>6</sup> Critique of the Gotha Programme. With Appendices by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, ed. C.P. Dutt (New York: International Publishers, 1938, 1966), 8.

<sup>7</sup> William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (revised ed.; Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), 789.

ing the truths of Marxism. If this were true, Marxists' self-conception would also be true—only a Marxist elite could lead humanity to freedom.

But it is not true. Not only non-Marxist political ideas, but religious ideas and artistic creations are ways of thinking about society and human values, on an equal standing with political thought. Blake's religious art, for example, drawn from his lower-class Christian traditions and incorporating the thought of the age, enabled Blake to find solutions to social problems that the revolutionary movements of his time ignored. Therefore ordinary people, who use religion, art, popular belief, and personal value systems in their thought, are capable of running society—if they can find in their thought the reasons for love and self-sacrifice that make this possible.

Anarchists need, then, to take artistic and religious thought seriously as ideas about society, not to ignore or patronize them or pay half-attention with mild embarrassment. Understanding that political thought is one among many ways of understanding society will help us purge ourselves of the arrogance—in truth, the ruling class mentality—that has deformed both anarchist and Marxist traditions.

**Related reading:** Books about Blake's politics and religion include David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Dover), the classic study of his politics; E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, cited above; my own *The Chained Boy: Orc and Blake's Idea of Revolution* (Bucknell), which I draw on in this article; *Blake, Politics, and History*, edited by Jackie DiSalvo, G. A. Rosso, and me, with several fine articles on politics, religion, and the London radical milieu (Garland); and Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* (Michigan State UP). Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (Vintage) is the leading history of British radicalism in Blake's era, 1790-1832. For Blake's poetry and artwork: Erdman's *Complete Poetry and Prose or Blake's Poetry and Designs*, edited by Johnson and Grant (Norton), a fairly full selection with excellent notes and much art. For art, see Dover Publishers' cheap color facsimiles of *America*, *Europe*, *Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *The Book of Urizen*, with printed texts. All the "illuminated books" are also available from Princeton UP in \$20-35 full-color paper editions. All the books named are in print except Altizer, which is available in libraries. Online, the "illuminated books" can be found in full-color facsimile at the William Blake Archive at the University of Virginia, [www.iath.virginia.edu](http://www.iath.virginia.edu); multiple copies are reproduced for some, showing Blake's variations in coloring from copy to copy.

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