

The Responses of William Blake and Joseph Priestley to Two Swedenborgian Ideas

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1 AS a "prerequisite to attendance" at the general conference of the New Jerusalem Church in April 1789, William Blake and his wife, Catherine, signed a document stating the following:

We whose Names are hereunto subscribed, do each of us approve of the Theological Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, believing that the Doctrines contained therein are genuine Truths, revealed from Heaven, and that the New Jerusalem Church ought to be established, distinct and separate from the Old Church.¹

Given the Blakes' association with the New Jerusalem Church in 1789, it is tempting to argue that the critique of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) in *The Marriage of*

Heaven and Hell (possibly completed as early as the final months of 1790)² anticipates Joseph Priestley's expostulation with the Swedenborgians in his *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church*. (Priestley's *Letters* were not published until the second half of 1791, delayed several weeks by the mob's burning of his home in Birmingham.)³ While Jon Mee has pointed out that Priestley's "rationalism is often presented as making [him] irrelevant to Blake studies,"⁴ I should like to explore what seem to be meaningful similarities between the responses of Blake and Priestley to specific details of Swedenborg's writing.

2 An important early juxtaposition of *The Marriage* and Priestley appears in John Howard's essay on Blake and Swedenborgianism: "*The Marriage* was not the sole attack on the Swedenborgians; Blake was joined by other members of the [Joseph] Johnson circle, and by Joseph Priestl[e]y in particular."⁵ However, it might be more accurate to view *The Marriage* in the broader context of Priestley's long-standing campaign against corruptions and error in Christianity, as Marilyn Butler proposes: "The satirical attack of *The Marriage* draws strength from the political, intellectual leadership offered by the whole of Priestley's career, that thirty-year campaign in favour of individualism and against priestcraft, authority, and 'corruptions.'"⁶ Blake's language in *The Marriage* does exhibit notable affinities with Priestley's earlier *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), as Morton Paley and Graham Pechey have observed.⁷ In *Disquisitions* as well as *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), Priestley argues against an immaterial soul existing independent of the body. He maintains that "we have no reason to suppose that there are in man two substances so distinct from each other" as "matter" and "spirit," and seeks to demonstrate that "the doctrine of a *soul* is altogether unphilosophical, and un-

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1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 50.

2. There is disagreement about the date of completion of *The Marriage*. The traditional dating of 1790-93 derives mainly from David Erdman's argument regarding how Blake formed the lowercase letter "g" in various works (whether with a conventional ear or an idiosyncratic leftward ear on the upper bowl of the letter). See David V. Erdman, "Dating Blake's Script: The 'g' Hypothesis," *Blake* 3.1 (1969): 8-13. As Joseph Viscomi observes, *The Marriage* does not refer to literary works or historical events that can be dated later than 1790, and copy F contains Blake's handwritten reference to the year 1790 above the text on plate 3. See Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 233-34 and 237. Further arguments for 1790 as the year of completion can be found in Viscomi, "The Evolution of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1997): 284-85; Viscomi, "The Lessons of Swedenborg; or, The Origin of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) 176-81; and William Blake, *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (Princeton: Princeton University Press/William Blake Trust, 1993) 113-15. For a detailed argument that *The Marriage* "made its first public appearance in 1793 rather than 1790," see William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, ed. with an introduction and commentary by Michael Phillips (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2011) 32-44 (quotation at 42).

3. See Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church, Formed by Baron Swedenborg* (Birmingham, 1791) iv-v.

4. Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 6.

5. John Howard, "An Audience for *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *Blake Studies* 3 (1970): 23.

6. Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 47.

7. Paley suggests that "Priestley's denial of the dichotomy of soul and body" in *Disquisitions* is a view "very close" to that expressed by Blake's "voice of the Devil" (*Energy and the Imagination: A Study of the Development of Blake's Thought* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970] 8-9). Pechey traces Blake's polemic "against the dichotomies of metaphysics which inform [Swedenborg's] discourse" to *Disquisitions* ("*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Text and Its Conjunction*," *Oxford Literary Review* 3 [1979]: 57).

scriptural.⁸ In both works, he suggests the derivative nature of the soul, i.e., he always speaks of the “soul distinct from the body,”⁹ while in *The Marriage* Blake twice avers that man has no “body distinct from his soul,” as if partly affirming and partly amending Priestley.¹⁰ Mee observes that “the proximity of [Priestley’s] language [in *Corruptions of Christianity*] to Blake’s on Plate 4 of *The Marriage* suggests that Priestley may well have been a direct source in this instance.”¹¹

- 3 Notwithstanding critical observations of affinities between Blake’s and Priestley’s language, two Swedenborgian ideas to which Blake and Priestley both respond in *The Marriage* and *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* seem to have been overlooked: Swedenborg’s contention that there is no space in the spiritual world¹² and his claim to have seen God.¹³ In the fourth “Memorable Fancy,” after Blake’s narrating devil and his “friend the Angel” have visited “the infinite Abyss” and the mill at the end of a “church vault” (E 41-42, pls. 17-19), the devil proposes to show the angel his “eternal lot”:

he laughd at my proposal: but I by force suddenly caught him in my arms, & flew westerly thro’ the night, till we were elevated above the earths shadow: then I flung myself with him directly into the body of the sun, here I clothed myself in white, & taking in my hand Swedenborgs volumes sunk from the glorious clime, and passed all the planets till we came to saturn, here I staid to rest & then leap’d into the void, between saturn & the fixed stars.

Here said I! is your lot, in this space, if space it may be calld. (E 42, pl. 19)

The angel dismisses the episode as a “phantasy” imposed upon him (E 42, pl. 20), but Blake’s description of outer

space, including “the earths shadow,” “the body of the sun,” “the planets,” “saturn,” and “the fixed stars,” together with his mocking reference to “space, if space it may be calld,” suggests the absurdity of Swedenborg’s claim that “in the spiritual world there are not spaces, but appearances of spaces.”¹⁴ Priestley answers Swedenborg’s claims respecting space by noting that “it is impossible for us to exclude the ideas of *space*, or *duration*”¹⁵ from the idea of God, and also suggests that Swedenborg has mistaken his dreams for visions:

His idea of there being no *space* in the spiritual world, but only the appearance of it, was suggested to him by what was represented to his mind in those visions. For, continuing in the same place, he fancied himself to be transported to a great distance, and after conversing with the inhabitants of one world, he sometimes instantly found himself in another. All this passing in his own mind, he naturally concluded, that the objects which seemed to occupy real space, in what he calls *the Spiritual World* ... had no real bulk, but only the appearance of it.¹⁶

While Blake bluntly ridicules Swedenborg and Priestley attempts to account rationally for Swedenborg’s claim, both nonetheless identify as problematic a specific idea in Swedenborg’s writing.

- 4 Although the similarity with Priestley is somewhat weaker in this instance, the discussion between Blake’s devil and the prophets seems to answer the claim that God “hath manifested himself in Person” to Swedenborg.¹⁷ In *The Marriage*, Blake’s narrator demands of Ezekiel and Isaiah

how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that

8. Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. To Which Is Added the History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; with Its Influence on Christianity, Especially with Respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-existence of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Birmingham, 1782) 1: ii, 270 (emphasis in original).

9. Priestley, *Disquisitions* 1: 271-72, 278. See also *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (Birmingham, 1782) 1: 330, 345.

10. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor–Random House, 1988) [hereafter “E”] 34, pl. 4, and 39, pl. 14.

11. Mee 138. It should be emphasized, however, that Blake may just as well have known these concepts from Priestley’s *Disquisitions*. See note 7, above.

12. See Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Wisdom of Angels, Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, [trans. Nathaniel Tucker] (London, 1788) nn. 7-10 and 69-72. Blake’s annotations to these sections of *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* do not indicate any immediate disagreement with Swedenborg’s ideas of space. Howard discusses Blake’s criticism of Swedenborg’s idea of space in connection with Priestley’s *Letters*, but solely in terms of Swedenborg’s ignorance of *Georgium Sidus* (the planet Uranus), which was discovered by William Herschel in 1781 (Howard 47-48).

13. In an extract from *True Christian Religion* read at the opening of the general conference of the New Jerusalem Church, Swedenborg defends his “Memorable Relations” against the charge “that they are the Fictions of Imagination” by claiming, “it hath pleased the Lord to manifest Himself to me, and to send me to teach the Things relating to his New Church” (Anon., *Minutes of a General Conference of the Members of the New Church, Signified by the New Jerusalem in the Revelation: Held in Great East Cheap, London, from the 13th to the 17th of April, 1789* [London, 1789] 16). See also proposition XL: “This Second Coming of the Lord is effected by Means of his Servant EMANUEL SWEDENBORG, before whom he hath manifested himself in Person” (*Minutes* 29).

14. Swedenborg, *The Delights of Wisdom Respecting Conjugal Love. After Which Follow the Pleasures of Insanity Respecting Scortatory Love*, [trans. Henry Servanté] (London, 1790) n. 50.

15. Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* 49 (emphasis in original).

16. Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* 52 (emphasis in original).

17. See note 13, above.

they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God. nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing. (E 38, pl. 12)

To assert that God “spake” to the prophets is obviously not the same thing as Swedenborg’s claim, but in both cases God communicates personally and directly with man. In his *Letters*, Priestley reprints without comment an extract from *A Short Account of the Honourable Emanuel Swedenborg* (1787) in which Swedenborg says that “the Lord himself ... was graciously pleased to manifest himself to me.”¹⁸ Elsewhere in the *Letters*, Priestley states the Unitarian belief that God is “invisible and omnipresent” and “not the object of any of our senses.”¹⁹ Blake’s manner of articulating his idea of God obviously differs from Priestley’s more temperate expression, yet Isaiah’s claim that God cannot be seen “in a finite organical perception” but rather as “the infinite in every thing” invites comparison with Priestley’s “invisible and omnipresent” God. Ultimately, however, it is important to bear in mind the essential difference between Blake and Priestley. It should be noted that Priestley’s overall purpose in his *Letters* is to emphasize what Unitarianism and Swedenborgianism have in common²⁰ and to persuade Swedenborgians to become Unitarians. Blake criticizes Swedenborg as insufficiently visionary, while Priestley finds fault with the irrational aspects of Swedenborg’s writings and entreats Swedenborgians to “re-examine these things, and believe no man in contradiction to your own reason.”²¹ Priestley would also have been uncomfortable with the visionary dimensions of *The Marriage*.²²

- 5 Butler is correct to point out that “Blake’s quarrel with the Swedenborgians is far less doctrinal than Priestley’s.”²³ Although Blake and Priestley do not agree exactly in their responses to Swedenborg’s assertions, together they resist Swedenborg as a potential “cause of imposition” (E 38, pl. 12) and source of further corruptions of Christianity. It should come as no surprise that Blake may have had Priestley’s writings in mind while he worked on *The Marriage*, given Priestley’s stature and intellectual prestige among the authors published by Joseph Johnson (for whom Blake produced eighty-three engravings during the period

1790-95).²⁴ I acknowledge patent differences in social standing between Priestley (a prominent scientist, philosopher, biblical scholar, and theologian) and Blake (an obscure engraver, printmaker, artist, and poet), but I suggest that the two men are not so far apart in ideas as modern scholarship would sometimes have us believe. That is not to say that Priestley’s writings alone could have informed Blake’s response to Swedenborg in *The Marriage*, but given their shared professional associations in the Johnson circle, such similarities in their writings seem more than merely coincidental.

18. Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* xvi-xvii.

19. Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* 63, 61.

20. See Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* 2: “We are even agreed with respect to many of the most important particulars of the corruptions of christian doctrine.”

21. Priestley, *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* 61.

22. See Michael Scrivener, “A Swedenborgian Visionary and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,” *Blake* 21.3 (winter 1987-88): 102: “*The Marriage* runs counter in essential ways to the Rational Dissent of the Johnson circle” and “positions itself against ... Priestley,” particularly on account of “Rational Dissent’s hostility to all varieties of ‘religious enthusiasm.’”

23. Butler 47.

24. See Bentley 817-19.