

All Religions are One:

A Note on Sources

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ALL RELIGIONS are ONE

The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness

The Argument As the true method of knowledge is experiment the true faculty of knowing must be the faculty which experiences. This faculty I treat of.

PRINCIPLE 1st That the Poetic Genius is the true Man. and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius. which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon.

PRINCIPLE 2^d As all men are alike in outward form, So (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius

PRINCIPLE 3^d No man can think write or speak from his heart, but he must intend truth. Thus all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weaknesses of every individual

PRINCIPLE 4. As none by traveling over known lands can find out the unknown. So from already acquired knowledge Man could not acquire more. therefore an universal Poetic Genius exists

PRINCIPLE. 5. The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy.

PRINCIPLE 6 The Jewish & Christian Testaments are An original derivation from the Poetic Genius. this is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation

PRINCIPLE 7th As all men are alike (tho' infinitely various) So all Religions & as all similars have one source

The true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius (E 1-2)

1 WILLIAM Blake's early tract *All Religions are One* was etched on ten copperplates c. 1788. In seven "principles," Blake sets out to prove that a spiritual dimension of man, which he names the "Poetic Genius," exists, and that this has been the origin of all religions. The gnomic principles have remained somewhat impenetrable because scholarly criticism has lost sight of the intellectual context in which the tract was produced. This short note is an attempt to recover the most important discourses to which Blake provides a response.

2 The most important influence is that of the Swedish theosophist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). In the late 1780s, Blake was attracted to Swedenborg's writings: he annotated several of Swedenborg's books and was in contact with Swedenborgian circles in London. His sympathy was probably at its height at the time he etched *All Religions are One*. When the tract is read within a Swedenborgian framework, its resonances with the theosophist's work become clear. This is not to imply that Blake sought any profound allegiance with Swedenborgianism. In fact, his twisting of Swedenborgian mainstays bespeaks an urge to reformulate Swedenborg's ideas. As Blake says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Swedenborg has not spoken any new truths, but only written "the Contents or Index of already publish'd books" (E 42). *All Religions are One* amalgamates several contemporary pseudoscientific discourses that—although confirming some of the ideas propounded in Swedenborg's writings—were refashioned by Blake into a new synthesis that transcends its constituent parts.

The Poetic Genius

3 In *All Religions are One*, Blake sets out to address "the true faculty of knowing," which is "the faculty which experiences." Arguably, this sounds Lockean (Frye 14, 28, Damon 343). But, in dealing with the internal spiritual man, Blake is closer to Swedenborg's focus in *True Christian Religion* (a summary of Swedenborg's teachings given to initiates) on man's "Faculty of attaining Knowledge," which includes both sensory impressions and spiritual knowledge communicated to the spirit within (n. 480). Elsewhere, Swedenborg also writes at length about the "Faculties of the Soul," through which man experiences an "Influx" of divine knowledge in varying degrees (*Influx* 57).

4 Blake's key term "Poetic Genius" is also directly linked to a Swedenborgian context, insofar as it appears twice in

Blake's annotations to the English translation of Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1788). In both cases, he replaces Swedenborg's reference to God's love and wisdom, which man is said to receive as an influx into his inner being, with the notion of "Poetic Genius" (E 603). Swedenborg identifies the Holy Ghost as the name given to the divine spirit that proceeds out of God to convey divine knowledge to the human race.

- 5 In the statement "Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius," Blake is using "genius" in the eighteenth-century sense of a spirit that inspires a nation or a people to their particular manners and poetry, and thereby creates their essence. For Swedenborg, a people's religion was determined by their ability to receive the divine spirit. For instance, he speaks of the Africans in the interior parts of the continent as surpassing "other Gentiles in the Strength and Clearness of interior Discernment" because of their specific "Genius and Temper" (*TCR* nn. 837, 840).
- 6 But what are we to make of Blake's designation "poetic"? Blake's "Poetic Genius" functions as the divine spirit that acts as a catalyst for religious narratives around the world. With this usage, Blake tweaks "genius" to mean a people's poetic capability to produce religious codes. The term is found verbatim in the dissenting radical Gilbert Wakefield's note to Thomas Gray's "Progress of Poesy."¹ Here, Wakefield describes the "influence of poetic Genius over the remotest and most uncivilized nations ... the Erse, Norwegian, and Welch fragments, the Lapland and American songs" (69). This is a recognition of the literary quality inherent in the many non-Christian religious texts that were being edited and published at the time. Blake says something similar when he later (in his annotations to Bishop Watson) promotes the reading of "the Edda of Iceland the Songs of Fingal the accounts of North American Savages [and] ... Homers Iliad." Contrary to the Anglican scholars of comparative religion who called such mythologies "savage," Blake holds that they contain an element of divine truth (E 615).
- 7 In the sixth principle of *All Religions are One*, Blake emphasizes that the biblical testaments stem from the "Poetic Genius"—although they are only a "derivation," since man can only communicate spiritual truth through his "confined nature of bodily sensation." This constellation of ideas points in the direction of Swedenborg, who identifies what can be construed as a "poetic" element in the testaments. In

1. The 1786 edition with Wakefield's notes was not the one Blake used when he was commissioned to illustrate "The Progress of Poesy" and other of Gray's poems in 1797.

the 1784 translation of Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* (which Blake owned and annotated), a note explains that "the art of poetry confessedly borrows its [*sic*] most striking beauties" from the "Emblematical Similitude" between "our Natural World" and a higher spiritual truth. So, for example, "the lillies of the valley," from Song of Songs, denote candor, humility, and the true church in "correspondent natural emblems" (59). According to Swedenborg, antediluvian man was able to communicate divine truths in a purely abstract language immediately understood without reference to any objects on earth. This ability was lost, however. So, at the time the testaments were written, divine messages could only be invoked through a language of symbols that had recourse to natural objects, "like Similitudes, and Comparisons taken from such Things as are in Nature" (*TCR* n. 215).

- 8 When Blake states that "the Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius" and that "all sects of Philosophy are from the Poetic Genius adapted to the weaknesses of every individual," he follows the basic outline of Swedenborg's ideas. In *True Christian Religion*, Swedenborg explains that the biblical apostles were filled with the spirit of the divine when they wrote, but that each one of them spoke "according to his own particular Intelligence; the Lord filled them all with his Spirit, but each took a Portion thereof according to the Quality of his peculiar Perception, and exercised it according to the Quality of his Strength or Power." The same goes for every minister of the church. All religious men aim to speak the truth, but due to the different degrees of their receptive faculties, the communications of the divine spirit will be expressed in "an infinite Variety." This creates different sects, as "every particular Tenet or Doctrine may be explained a thousand different Ways, being like a *Cornucopia*, from which each Person draws forth what favours, and is adequate to his own particular Genius" (*TCR* n. 154).
- 9 Rather than rejecting non-Christian religions, Blake holds that no religious teacher "can think write or speak from his heart, but he must intend truth." It is much the same argument that Swedenborg puts forward in *True Christian Religion* when he speaks of the "Mahometans ... who acknowledge God, and love what is just, and do Good from religious Motives" (*TCR* n. 832). But Blake takes this pluralism further, presumably influenced by the widening scope provided by eighteenth-century comparative mythology. One of the main sources he used was undoubtedly Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774–76), for which Blake's master, James Basire, was commissioned to provide engravings (Damon 61, Feldman and Richardson 241–48). Bryant claims that Egyptian, Greek, and other pagan mythologies were essentially derived from the worship of the sun, which

in turn was the source of the original Israelite worship of the one true God. Blake would later refer to Bryant as one of the many antiquarians who had proved that “the antiquities of every Nation under Heaven ... are the same thing All had originally one language, and one religion, this was the religion of Jesus, the everlasting Gospel” (E 543).

The Internal and External Form of Man

- 10 The fact that the “Poetic Genius” can only express itself in the language of the natural world finds a parallel in Blake’s assertion that “the body or outward form of Man” is only a derivative of the inner “Genius” in man. With this statement, he is rehearsing a recognizable strain of Swedenborgian philosophy, according to which “the material Body, with which his [man’s] Spirit is clothed in the natural World, is an accessory Covering for the Sake of continuing his Species, and for the Sake of the Formation of the Internal Man; for the Internal Man is formed in the natural Body, as a Tree in the Ground, and as Seed in the Fruit” (TCR n. 454). For Swedenborg, our physical body is activated from inside by our soul; that is to say, the human soul “receives it’s [sic] Influx from God, and transmits it through the perceptive Faculties of the Mind to the Body” (*Influx* 6). Swedenborg also explains a little later: “It seems indeed to outward Appearance, as if the Tongue and the Lips spake, and the Arms and Hands acted by some Power of Life in themselves; whereas it is Thought that speaks, and the Will that acts ... through their respective material Organs formed from this outward Natural World” (*Influx* 50).
- 11 Blake makes the claim that since all men share certain outward characteristics, so the internal form of man must be alike too. His interest in the human as a category of sameness-in-variety would undoubtedly have been piqued through his reading of Johann Caspar Lavater. In 1787, Blake’s friend Henry Fuseli was preparing a translation of Lavater’s *Aphorisms on Man*, which was published by Joseph Johnson in 1788 (Blake was commissioned to engrave the frontispiece). The first two aphorisms in Lavater’s book clearly invoke the work of the French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon: “1. Know, in the first place, that mankind agree in essence, as they do in their limbs and senses. 2. Mankind differ as much in essence as they do in form, limbs, and senses—and only so, and not more.” This struck a chord with Blake (as several critics have noted), who annotates, “This is true Christian philosophy far above all abstraction” (E 584). Lavater’s idea of an essence that underlies all human variety is further pursued in his *Essays on Physiognomy* (English translation 1789–98), to which Blake contributed engravings. Lavater refers to Buffon’s *Natural History*, in which we find the origin of this idea. Buffon identifies the existence of an interior agent—the “internal mould” (“moule intérieur”)—as the

basis of all species, including the human one. This agent directs the growth and development of the organism and keeps it within the confines of the species. He describes the “internal mould” as “the essence, the unity, and the continuation of the species” and states that it will therefore act as a matrix that forms and shapes the species “till the end of time” (Buffon 2: 215), while a “fortuitous assemblage of organic particles” will combine to “produce an infinite variety of organized bodies” (2: 267). This comes close to Blake’s assertion that “all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various).”

- 12 In *All Religions are One*, Blake’s assertion that “the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius” appears to indicate that men’s external works are reflections of the virtues emphasized in a nation’s religious texts. This reminds us of “The Divine Image” from *Songs of Innocence* (1789), in which we are told that every man can become an image of the divine since “Mercy has a human heart / Pity, a human face: / And Love, the human form divine, / And Peace, the human dress” (E 12-13). Thus, if these virtues are practiced every human may resemble Christ, no matter whether he be “heathen, turk or jew,” for “Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell, / There God is dwelling too.” This follows the Swedenborgian dictum that when the external man acts in accordance with the inner divine, “he becometh an Image of God” (TCR n. 41)—what Swedenborg also refers to as the “Divine Human.”

Context

- 13 Which audience did Blake have in mind for his tract? One possibility is that it was aimed at the rationalist coterie who frequented Johnson’s shop in St. Paul’s Churchyard. Blake had close connections to several of the authors who gathered there and was commissioned to engrave illustrations for several of Johnson’s publications from 1780 onwards. It has often been assumed that the liberals who were Johnson’s primary authors and customers rejected all mystical contemplation. However, it was possible to buy the Swedish poet and radical Thomas Thorild’s *True Heavenly Religion Restored* (1790) from Johnson’s shop. Thorild presents a thesis that supports the existence of a higher spiritual reality through the language of natural philosophy. But, in the last chapter, Thorild aligns his philosophical reflections with “the principal beauties of Swedenborgianism” (126). The reviewer in the *Analytical Review*, Johnson’s journal, affirms that “in this plan or idea of divine religion, divinity, that never could pretend to the shadow of a demonstration, becomes for the first time a science” (333). In setting up propositions as numbered points, Thorild emulates the format of the systematic-philosophical method that Swedenborg had carried over from his time as a natural philosopher, before he began to have visions. Blake seems to capitalize on the same rationalist format that got so

many readers excited about Swedenborg's mysticism under the guise of being a science.

- 14 Thorild's propositions are developments of Swedenborgian ideas and can be compared with Blake's "principles" in several respects. For instance, Thorild proffers that God influences man "according to [his] Degrees of Perfection" (21). In a later passage, it is further explained that God no longer needs to perform miracles for mankind, because he "has prepared all [men] for the full Perception of Truth" in the present "Age of Science and Reasoning" (121). In another place, he speaks of the Bible as written in a language of "human Fancy, of Error or mere Appearances," behind which is a "purer Language" of "eternal Truth" (79-80). In comparison with Blake's fifth principle, which states that the "reception of the Poetic Genius ... is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy," Thorild also speaks of an "interior or pure Sense," which he names "Vision," and which can be proved by "so vast a Number of prophetic, of mystic, and heavenly Minds that have appeared in all Ages" (83). It seems that, only a few years before, Blake attempted to deliver something not entirely different, albeit in a shorter and more concise form.

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