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**READING WILLIAM BLAKE:  
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to point out possible strategies and criteria to use when we have to introduce our students to "embarrassing" authors that we may be compelled to include in our curriculum. By "embarrassing", I refer to the fact that sometimes teachers undervalue the moral impact on students of the authors they study. In fact this paper is the direct consequence of a sense of failure in the integration of faith and learning I felt after introducing the English poet William Blake to my non-Adventist 18-year-old students. As a teacher of English Literature I included in the curriculum not only the famous collection *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, but also the so-called "Proverbs of Hell" drawn from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. That gave me the opportunity to explain famous poems such as "The Tyger" in a broader literary context, but it also introduced ethical problems which I was not quite ready to face at that time.

So this paper will consist of two sections, one dealing with the criteria we could use in the classroom to address these problems and a second longer section about William Blake's writings and how the criteria and objectives underlined in the first section may be applied to his writings.

### The purpose and danger of literature

Why should we study literature? Is it worthwhile? These are not rhetorical questions; they are questions all students ask sooner or later and their response varies greatly according to the individual's interests, maturity and aesthetic taste. However, there is a certain degree of agreement among Christian literary critics as to what literature is all about and its value for students as well as general readers.

To Frederick Pottle, a novelist "is engaged in the same kind of activity as a man who tells a story in a club room or in an after-dinner speech." He goes on to say: "There is a great difference, of course, but it is a difference of degree, not of kind" (1).

In other words, writing literature means communicating one's experience, in a way "more valuable and memorable than the fleeting and atomic poetry of ordinary speech" (2).

To Leland Ryken literature imparts "an experiential knowledge, fully as important to human well-being as scientific knowledge" (3). Frank E. Gaebelain thinks that literature is "a mirror held up to life, being almost as varied as life itself" (4).

To read literature means looking at the worldview of another man or woman "from the inside," and this can be a very rewarding experience. But it can be also a dangerous one. T.S. Eliot stated:

"Consider the adolescent reading of any person with some literary sensibility. Everyone, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seduction of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet. Very likely he was carried away by several poets, one after the other. The reason for this passing infatuation is not merely that our sensibility to poetry is keener in adolescence than in maturity. What happens is a kind of inundation, an invasion of the undeveloped personality, the empty (swept and garnished) room, by the stronger personality of the poet. The same thing may happen at a later age to persons who have not done much reading. One author takes complete possession of us for a time; then another; and finally they begin to affect each other in our mind. We weigh one against another; we see that each has qualities absent from others, and qualities incompatible with the qualities of others; we begin to be, in fact, critical; and it is our growing critical power which protects us from excessive possession by any one literary personality" (5).

This critical power becomes crucial in the light of the consequences of the "invasion of the undeveloped personality". T.S. Eliot goes on to say:

"If we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment, and take our reading merely for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human being, whether we intend to be or not"(6).

Therefore it is important not only to introduce our students to a wide variety of literary authors but also to offer them a frame of reference on how to deal with these powerful means of communication so that they may reach a stage when they can state with Eliot:

"This is a view of life of a person who was a good observer within his limits (...) but he looked at it in a different way from me, because he was a different man (...) so what I am looking at is the world seen by a particular mind" (7).

Therefore, when we suggest a method of interpretation to our students we give them an intellectual framework which hopefully will protect them from "insidious influences" (8) without depriving them of the opportunity to understand human experience better and to know how other people view life. Using the functions of literature underlined by Ryken, we might say that we want to offer them better opportunities to understand human experience, to enlarge their beings, to give form to their own experiences, to heighten their awareness, to think more deeply and finally to have fun (9).

#### A few preliminary remarks

"There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (10).

This quotation from Wilde's pen - which so shocked the highly moral Victorian world - symbolizes a problem which still troubles Adventist teachers around the world. This is even more true in those schools run by the Adventist church where most students are not Adventist. Besides, there is often a definite curriculum to follow, so that a teacher is not allowed to skip such famous authors as, for example, Blake, Lawrence, Joyce. And after all, should he?

As George R. Knight demonstrates in "Myths in Adventism," the position of E. White has often been misunderstood as regards literature. However, though we can safely say that the Adventist Church has no pre-conceived bias against the teaching of literature, can we rule out any limitation of the material we use in the class-room?

That is a complicated subject, which depends on different factors:

1) The culture in which the Adventist teacher operates. Absolute freedom does not make sense in all cases. In an Islamic country an Adventist teacher would hardly use S. Rushdie's "Satanic Verses" to introduce his/her pupils to contemporary English language literature. In other words, the teacher should first take into account the cultural values as well as the interests and sensitivity of his students, and only secondarily his own likings.

2) The age of the pupils. It's obvious that in order to deal with such subjects in contemporary works as the role of sex or, say, the meaninglessness of life, a degree of maturity is needed. While the message of an author can be completely misunderstood because of cultural differences, it can also be over-simplified or even seriously distorted if some preliminary questions have not been introduced in the reader's mind beforehand. Sometimes only experience can create the receptive "humus" that makes students appreciate and discuss the problems put forward by literary works.

3) The religious background of the pupils. This point differs from the first one in that the teacher and the student may share the same social background - for example, that of the

Western world - but not the same religious background. In other words, nothing can be taken for granted. While pupils from Adventist families may share a given set of values with their teacher, this may not be the case when non-Adventist pupils make up the majority of the classroom.

However we shouldn't over-emphasize this point because many students coming from Adventist backgrounds often experience the same ethical problems, doubts or outright disbelief as their non-Adventist class-mates. On the other hand, experience proves that non-Adventist students often share many values with their Adventist teachers even though these values may not be "dressed" with a religious language. In this respect, lessons on literature may help to emphasize and focus the attention of students on those points where there is substantial agreement between Christian and secular views and so they may contribute to building bridges of understanding. Having said that, there is a difference: it is usually relatively easy to introduce authors who explicitly treat religious subjects to Adventist pupils while it is not always advisable to do that with non-Adventist classes.

The point of this essay is that the real danger to students does not come so much from the literary works themselves (though as we have seen some care is needed in the selection of the literary passages) as from the way we teach them. Now let's make one point clear. Provided the first two conditions are met - common cultural sensitivity and adequate age - my opinion is that students should not be deprived of their right to look at the world as it is, though the teacher may object to some values and ideas conveyed by a given author. This is a very thorny problem. I have recently listened to a lady criticizing an Adventist college because D.H. Lawrence's novel "Lady Chatterley's Lover" was being studied there. I myself have had many doubts about the general message conveyed by a less controversial author such as W. Blake, whose message may be interpreted as a direct attack against Christianity (we'll look into the problem in the next section).

It's obvious that there must be some limits in the choice we make as regards literature; otherwise we might as well regard pornography as a form of literary production. The only reasonable answer to this problem is to adopt the criterion of "cultural sensitivity," that is to analyze the degree of acceptance that a given work may or may not have in our society at large. This criterion is therefore linked to point number 1, that is the cultural environment in which the Adventist teacher operates. In other words, if Lady Chatterley's Lover is commonly read, discussed and appreciated in Italy, an Italian Adventist teacher could (or even should) analyze the main themes and the overall message of the book. Why? There are at least three good reasons.

1) The authors we feel uncomfortable with are very often regarded by students as the most thought-provoking and interesting. Though indirectly, many ideas conveyed in these books constitute an ideological basis for patterns of behavior and/or ideologies that are against the teaching of the Bible. If we neglect to deal with these authors and their doctrines we seriously risk our teaching becoming irrelevant to the life of our students. It is better to deal with a given problem and help the students to see it from different viewpoints rather than leave them to an often dogmatic anti-Christian worldview.

2) As George R. Knight underlines in "Myths in Adventism," through literature we can often understand what the problems, the challenges and the doubts of society are all about (11). If we, together with our students, want to understand and possibly improve the world we live in, we need to know what people outside our classroom think and feel very deeply. In this case the teacher is expected to give his/her students moral and cultural criteria to discuss problems so that they can be understood and evaluated as objectively as possible. In other words literary

study "helps us see into the philosophic and religious perspective of large segments of modern culture"(12).

3) The common objection is that in some of these books we find many examples of immoral sexual behavior, violence, cheating and attitudes that are not in keeping with our faith. One cannot help questioning the wisdom of reading this narrative in the classroom. I think we must admit that we may find embarrassing passages in which the general meaning of the book itself may be lost in the background and single, isolated passages or situations taken out of their contexts may suggest an unacceptable set of values.

However, I wouldn't emphasize too much the seriousness of this objection. As teachers, we often need to select extracts from large books anyway. After all, it is a matter of organizing one's time. Taking advantage of that, I think it is perfectly honest on the part of the teacher to choose extracts which are sufficiently interesting and representative of the main themes of the book, but at the same time making sure they are not too provocative or offensive (13).

However, the main problem in teaching literature in an Adventist classroom does not always lie in the text but in the teacher, who sometimes does not give proper importance to the analysis of a literary work in the light of the social milieu of the author, his personal life, the moral codes of the time and the "spiritual truth" held in his works.

### AN APPROACH TO TEACHING "DIFFICULT WORKS"

Taking into account the life of an author, his social milieu and the moral codes of his time may appear as an obvious commonplace.

However the methodology we usually use to understand a novel from a literary point of view should also be used to understand the worldview and the religious implications of the novel at a deeper level.

Regarding the so-called "spiritual truth" that we find in the writings of our "difficult authors," I refer in this expression to a spiritual discovery which may have a deep spiritual implication regarding our view of life and its meaning. This discovery, which may have even been made by a self-proclaiming atheist, is in fact part of the Christian spiritual heritage, but for some reasons it may have been overlooked by the church and discovered and highlighted in the writings of a literary work. This obviously may happen even without the author's or the reader's full awareness. And it may or may not take on a polemical, aggressive or ironical form, depending on the personality of the author, his philosophical background and his social milieu.

My point is that we should share with our students the positive spiritual discoveries or the relevant criticism about today's Christianity that we may find in literary works. Obviously we shouldn't aim at destroying the trust of young people in the institutional Church ( a real danger not only for young people), but in the case of sensible, thoughtful criticism against Christianity or the churches we should take advantage of that by pointing to the need for personal and collective reforms. After all, isn't a Protestant principle the saying: "Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda," the reformed Church must be always reformed? Discovering the "spiritual truth" in literary works allows us to:

1- get a more sympathetic response from those students who find it hard to accept "the religious world" as it is;

2- offer a more balanced view of our authors, an attitude less judgmental and superficial. To be humble in our approach to literature (and to people in general) is always safer;

3- teach these authors better. If we are able to find some common ground with their philosophy, we'll feel more sympathetic with their problems and struggles, and we'll show their

shortcomings with the due respect that any human being deserves. This is an important point because I think it is very difficult to teach the ideas, the themes and the literary techniques of a work if deep inside ourselves we regard them and their authors as absolute rubbish. We must find some positive aspects that are relevant to us as Christian teachers as well as to our students, something that may help us in the human quest of the meaning of life.

Finally, we should try to teach literature not as an end in itself but as a means to discover our personality and to enlarge it, "to arouse our sensitivity to realities in daily life (...). Literature not only provides a philosophical perspective, but also elicits an emotional response. Quality literature does not allow us to view the issues of life with detachment" (14). By doing that, not only will we be able to defend our faith against the criticism of modern (and ancient) authors, but we will be able to stir the consciousness of our students so that hopefully they may ask themselves some basic questions such as: what is the true meaning of life? What am I doing to achieve a real meaningful life? What is the role God should play in my life? Is the God I was taught the same God as that of the Bible?

One of the major obstacles I see to achieving these results is the teachers' chronic lack of time. They lack time in the classroom and they lack time at home. Ideally every author of the curriculum should be dealt with from a religious point of view, taking into account not only the themes of his works but also his life, the religious and social problems of his time and the "spiritual" truth that is still relevant to us. However this is not always easy. In spite of that, we should make sure that our preparation is up to its goals, at least regarding the authors we find more difficult to come to terms with. To provide an example of the theoretical principles underlined so far, the following section will be about William Blake, rather an unorthodox Christian author who can be easily misunderstood if the problems and the concerns of his time are not adequately known and understood. The section is not meant to be a pattern for all the authors we would like to teach. In fact it is even unlikely that it may be used from the beginning to the end, as a teacher in a secondary school is not expected to deal with all themes in depth (especially teachers of English as a foreign language). However it may serve as resource material or at least as a general indication of what could be done to explain the most obvious difficulties we find in the writings of an "embarrassing" author.

#### AN EXAMPLE: WILLIAM BLAKE

In this section I am going to apply the principles I have already outlined to one of the authors I found it difficult at first to understand and explain in a Christian framework. I am referring to William Blake (1757-1827), one of the "musts" of English literature (for this section I am much indebted to the book by J.C.Davies, The Theology of William Blake, Clarendon Press). As the themes he deals with in his lyrics are clearly religious or have a very strong religious connotation, the message the author conveys is of great significance to the Adventist teacher. However, in his unorthodox kind of Christianity, in his sometimes obscure images and symbols (for example in his so-called "Prophetic works") and in his unconventional ethics, both teachers and students may reach conclusions which are neither correct (Blake's works can be easily misunderstood) nor desirable in a Christian school.

These difficulties are obvious even after a cursory reading of his most famous poems. One of the most famous is "The Garden of Love":

"I went to the Garden of Love,  
And saw what I never had seen:  
A Chapel was built in the midst,  
Where I used to play on the green.  
And the gates of this Chapel were shut,

And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;  
 So I turn'd to the Garden of Love  
 That so many sweet flowers bore;  
 And I saw it was filled with graves,  
 And tomb-stones where flowers should be;  
 And Priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,  
 And binding with briars my joys and desires".

In this poem full of symbols it is not difficult to recognize the stifling effect of a religious code ("Thou shalt not...") on the natural instincts and desires of man.

This is a thorny subject, especially for an Adventist teacher who has to work with young people who are particularly (and understandably, given their age) receptive to this "transgressive" message of freedom from "spiritual" oppression. On the other hand, the particular value that we as Adventists attach to God's law makes it imperative for us to look deeply into the real message of this author.

To make things even more complicated, we have to explain how such a deeply religious man, the same who wrote *Songs of Innocence*, could reach such "diabolical" conclusions as those we find in his "Proverbs of Hell" from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

"The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."  
 "Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity."  
 "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires."  
 "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion."  
 "(...) thus began Priesthood; Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had ordered such things. Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast."

In order to tackle all these problems we should bear in mind the three points already mentioned:

1. Can we find anything in his life that may help us understand his view on religion better? Is there anything in his early life that may explain later developments in his thought?
2. Can we find in the Church of his time and in the eighteenth century's society at large anything that may help us understand his attacks on the moral Law, the clergy and conventional morality?
3. Can we regard his criticism of morality and organized religion as still relevant today?

### Significant elements in Blake's life

Born in London, the son of a hosier, he received very little schooling except in art. Apprenticed to an engraver, he spent long months in Westminster Abbey, where, while copying its monuments for his master, he discovered the beauty of allegorical and flowery decorations and became imbued with the religious symbolism of the Gothic style.

In 1782 he married the daughter of a poor market gardener. She was so uneducated that he even had to teach her to read and write, but she proved the ideal wife for a genius like Blake, an eventually learnt to help him with his engraving and coloring. For some time he also enjoyed the help of a young brother, Robert, and when Robert died before his time, he claimed to have seen his spirit ascending heavenwards "clapping its hands for joy".

Though his inner life was full of ferment and fantasy, his outward one was quiet and uneventful. But for a short period at Felpham, Blake never left London, where, for years, he lived in solitude and obscurity, amid economic hardship and public misunderstanding. His last

years, however, were more serene, thanks to the support and admiration of a group of young disciples. We know with certainty that Blake was throughout his life a man deeply interested in religion. He even had "visions" which he considered from God. However, though those visions had a deep impact on his views on religion, they served only as a starting point. "When he said my visions - reports the faithful, if sometimes inaccurate disciple, Crabb Robinson - it was in the ordinary unemphatic tone in which we speak of trivial matters that every one understands and cares nothing about." So though he was certainly a visionary, some scholars prefer to regard him as a mystic. Davies stated that "Blake's mysticism is self-evident, and it has been accepted by the majority of his critics as the key to his personality and beliefs" (15).

### Blake and asceticism

However, there is a very important point to stress: at the outset of his poetical career, believing that asceticism and contemplation are indivisibly connected, he determined to regiment himself and force his character into the true ascetic mold. As Davies reports, "his notes on Lavater (the author of the book "Aphorisms" that Blake read in his youth) reveal a moral sensitivity which even the desert fathers would have commended: 'Uneasy; this I know not (514). 'Very uneasy indeed, but truth' (518). 'Uneasy, but I hope to mend (588)". Davies adds that "to stimulate himself to repentance and to further moral effort, he repeatedly recalled to mind his 'past sins, for these a man should never avert his thoughts from' (523)". However he soon realized that this was not the way for him. He rejected asceticism as a foolish means of self-cleansing. He wrote to a friend:

"I have indeed fought thro' a Hell of terrors and horrors (which none could know but myself) in a divided existence; now no longer divided nor at war with myself, I shall travel on in the strength of the Lord God" (letter to Hayley, 4 Dec. 1804).

In a way his experience resembles that of Luther, especially as we consider what he wrote to a friend at the end of his life:

"No discipline will turn one Man into another, even in the least particle, and such discipline I call Presumption and Folly. I have tried too much not to know this, and am very sorry for all such who may be led to such ostentatious Exertion against their Eternal Existence itself, because it is Mental Rebellion against the Holy Spirit, and fit only for a Soldier of Satan to perform" (letter to Linnell, 1 Feb. 1826).

However, before reaching a clear view on the matter, Blake's condemnation of asceticism involved at first the condemnation of Christianity as a whole. He believed the Gospel to be true, yet he felt compelled to reject it. It is inside this psychological frame that we have to consider *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or *Songs of Experience*.

### Blake's view of reason and nature

The second aspect we have to bear in mind is that we can't expect from a mystical poet like Blake to develop a well-balanced view on life and a clear, articulate theology. Davies repeatedly suggests that he should have been more in touch with the well-balanced, time-honored Catholic theology; on the contrary, he was a Protestant and as such he was bound to fall on subjectivism and exaggeration. In my opinion, a better explanation would rather underline the fact that he had a mystical vision of reality. This experience is never based on rational efforts, on the contrary, a concern for reason may even be detrimental in many cases. This is evident in his attitude towards Nature, a classical Romantic theme.

Blake objected to the simple contemplation of the beauty of nature because nature in itself may keep human beings from discovering their spiritual existence. He told Crabb

Robinson that "Nature is the work of the Devil for everything is Atheism which assumes the reality of the natural and unspiritual world".

On the contrary, when a man enters a "twofold vision," that is the second step of the mystical ladder, then he is able to see nature as a shadow of the eternal world. To Blake, with his illuminated vision, the world was transfigured; in this state of clarity, nature and imagination are seen to be one. In "Auguries of Innocence" he wrote:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
and a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
and Eternity in an Hour."

A tree ceased to be an object to him because he entered into a mutual relationship with it, encountering the very tree itself. In other words, his most important objective was to awaken the spiritual awareness of mankind, so he never cared much about the theoretical correctness of his statements as long as they forcefully expressed spiritual truths. In order to be effective they often needed to be expressed paradoxically in order to shock the complacency of the reader of the time.

### The Immanence of God

A third reason why we must be careful in our evaluation of the Proverbs of Hell or Songs of Experience is linked to the emphasis mysticism puts on the immanence of God. What at first sight may appear as pantheistic or even atheistic statements are often in fact provocative statements against the Divine Being of the Deists, or conversely statements that are meant to highlight the closeness between the Creator and his creature: "Seek not thy heavenly father beyond the skies", wrote Blake in *Milton* (16) and in *Jerusalem* he made Jesus say: "I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend:: Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me" (17). This is not too far from Jesus' declaration in John's Gospel and certainly not far from the idea many thinkers of the past had held about the relationship between God and man. "Let it be plainly understood," says St. Augustine, "that we cannot return to God unless we enter first into ourselves. God is everywhere, but not everywhere to us. There is but one point in the Universe Where God communicates with us and that is the center of our own soul. There he waits for us; there He meets us; there He speaks to us. To seek Him, therefore, we must enter into our own interior" (18).

However, even on this subject Blake's tendency toward drastic positions shows up again, as Crabb Robinson reports: "on my asking in what light he viewed the great question concerning the Divinity of Jesus Christ, he said - 'He is the only God'. But then he added - 'And so am I and so are you". This view is complicated by his idea on the nature of Man, the role of Imagination and the nature of God. Since Imagination partakes of both the "Divine Eternal Body in Every Man" (19) (that is, the real spiritual essence of man) and the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus (20), or the Divine Humanity (21) or the Bosom of God (22), then we might argue that there's no real separation between the nature of man and that of God. In fact his opinion of Incarnation has a strong bearing on this subject. According to Blake, in the Incarnation, man beholds "A human vision! Human Divine, Jesus the Saviour, blessed for ever" (23), where "the eternal face of man abides in the very heart of the Divine Trinity itself. So the transcendent becomes immanent" (24).

On the other hand, we find other statements by Blake where he takes a more traditional view of God and the difference between God and man is clearly made:

"And this is the covenant of Jehovah: if you forgive one-another, so shall Jehovah forgive you, that He himself may Dwell among you" (25).

So what do we make of those statements which suggest pantheistic leanings? Davies suggests two possible answers: "on the one hand, they may be extreme and unguarded expressions of the doctrine of immanence, elaborated in opposition to Deism and the tyranny of reason. On the other hand, they may be expressions of mystical experience, of the same nature as that to be found in Angelus Silesius, who asserted that 'I know that without me God could not exist for a moment' to underline the infinite love between God and man" (26).

Blake's alleged pantheism is still disputed among scholars. I tend to believe that as he developed a more well-balanced view of God the Father, he abandoned the most extreme pantheistic positions, though he always rejected the idea of God as "totally other," peculiar to the Protestant theology of our century and, in a way, of the rationalistic theology of his time.

### Blake and His Image of God

Another problem we face as we read, say, *Songs of Experience* (for example the poem "The Tyger") is the ambivalent attitude Blake seems to have about God the Father, where God arouses both admiration and fear. While in *Songs of Innocence* (1789) he conceived of God as a "meek" and "mild" "Little Lamb", in *Songs of Experience* (1794) the poet wonders whether God smiled "his work to see". He asks the Tyger: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?". Finally, in "The Chimney Sweeper" God is even regarded as a source of oppression!

Apparently while writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), Blake was going through a painful reassessment of his religious beliefs and values (27). It is in this period that his pantheistic leanings are more evident. In fact this should not come as a surprise if we think of a historical event which was a turning point in Blake's life: the French Revolution. On the one hand the Revolution was a great source of inspiration to him; on the other it became a source of great disillusion when Napoleon turned it into a tyranny.

In his introduction to a new edition of Blake's poems, Bronowski states:

"Some time between 1796 and 1800 the political undertone fades from his poems and their mood becomes more and more Christian" (28). When he wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or, one year later, *Songs of Experience*, he was still a political rebel who could not help associating a personal, traditional God with the King and the Church as the main agencies of oppression, as we read in "The Chimney Sweeper":

"and (my parents) are gone to praise God and his Priest and King, Who make up a heaven of our misery."

Under the strong anti-ecclesiastical mood of the French revolution, it is not surprising to see in such a rebel as Blake a pantheistic leaning, an explicit form of opposition to the pragmatic covenant between the Church, which rules in the name of God, and the State, which ruled in the name of the King. The next logical step was to accuse God the Father of being equally responsible for the situation. The humanity of Jesus better represented the great sacred values of the new mankind (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) as opposed to the values of tradition, usually personified by God and the King.

However, after the political disillusion brought about by the failure of the French Revolution, Blake lost interest in politics and he began to revalue his religious inspiration. He was still a rebel, but this time a religious rebel against Deism and the Anglican Church, with great sympathy for Methodism.

To sum up, we have seen some important points regarding his life which we should bear in mind when we study Blake's writings:

1. He began his religious experience as an ascetic, but later he strongly condemned asceticism.

2. He always used a rather shocking and provocative language. As a mystical thinker he had lots of famous examples whose use of a "meta-rational" language was regarded as perfectly normal.

3. Mysticism tends to blur the distance between God and man, with the danger of either making God too human or man too similar to God. As he accepted a mystical approach to God, he inevitably adopted a conception of God which especially before 1800, either was pantheistic or at least bordered on pantheism.

4. The influence of the French revolution, with its anti-ecclesiastical bias, may have contributed to his temporary view of God the Father as the main source of oppression, together with the political and religious establishment of the time. Eventually this aggressive attitude gave way to a more balanced judgment of God and religion, though he never failed to criticize conventional religious feelings.

### The historical context

However there is another aspect that we have to take into account if we want to fully understand Blake's writings and that is the religious situation of England at the end of the 18th century. In fact the religious scene at the turn of the century was still dominated by the influence of Deism. According to Davies, "reason had undermined the supernatural with the consequent supersession of religion by ethics" (29). In 1826 Hugh James Rose, delivering his course on 'The Commission and Consequent Duties of the Clergy,' opened his argument with a quotation from a sermon preached by Tillotson in 1678:

"For God's sake, what is Religion good for, but to reform the manners and Dispositions of Men, to restrain human Nature from Violence and Cruelty, from Falshood and Treachery, from Sedition and Rebellion? (30).

In Davies' view this was symptomatic of the spiritual decadence of the age, for moralistic appeals indicate a loss of religious vitality"(31). The predominant theme of sermons being such, Blake looked upon "Clergymen in the Pulpit" as "scourging Sin instead of Forgiving it" (32); priests were nothing but inquisitors (33); they were the agents of repression (34), the cursers of innocent joys (35).

"Thy purpose and the purpose of thy Priest and of thy Churches is to impress on men the fear of death, to teach trembling and fear, terror, constriction, abject selfishness" (36).

All that the Church did was to preach stern duty, passive obedience to the "stony law" (37), which issues in "the tears and sight and death sweat of the Victims " (38), but this is to worship the "God of this world", Satan and not Jesus, for "if Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour" (39). So it is easy to understand what Blake meant when he wrote his famous lyric, "The Garden of Love."

Blake was always opposed to the ecclesiastic ideal of public worship. That was due partly to his mysticism, where inward worship is always emphasized: "Every man may converse with God and be a King and Priest in his own house" (40). This is not surprising in the view of four characteristics Blake saw in the Church of his time: corruption, hypocrisy, lack of sensitivity and little faith in God. Without going into too many details, it's enough to say that in his opinion the sin of corruption lay in the union of Church and State. On this subject we can quote Dr. Johnson's famous remark: "No man can now be made a bishop for his learning and piety; his only chance of promotion is his being connected with someone who has parliamentary interests" (41). And Blake added: "The Beast and the Whore rule without control. State Religion... is the source of all Cruelty" (42). Hypocrisy was another evil of the Church: it made "up a heaven of misery," where abstinence was preached but not practiced.

Sermons were usually moral essays, but the Archdeacon Blackburne, writing in 1754, spoke of the body of clergy "whose lives and occupations are most foreign to their professions". (43)

In the poor curates' quest for the means to keep body and soul together, the clergy earned the reputation of being rapacious. Hence Blake's reference to "the Priest's o'ergoged Abdomen' (44). Furthermore, the Church of the time was insensitive to the plight of the poor. As we can read in "The Little Vagabond":

"Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold but the Ale-house is Healthy and pleasant and warm; besides I can tell where I am used well, Such usage in heaven will never do well.

But if at the Church they would give us some Ale, and a pleasant fire our souls to regale, We'd sing and we'd pray all the live-long day, Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray."

On the contrary, as we have seen, the Church "in deadly black" was bent on devouring the peasants' labor: "Why of the sheep do you not learn peace? Because I don't want you to shear my fleece" (45).

Finally the fourth evil of the Church was connected with its moralistic attitude, that is its emphasis on reason at the expense of the Spirit. Smith wrote that the piety of the period was "perhaps above all, a piety that had digested Revelation into Reason, and consequently took little interest in Christian Ethics" (46).

"That was the Age of Reason with Deism as one of the foremost factors in religious life, and reason itself the yard-stick by means of which the credibility of anything and everything was estimated" (47). According to Blake eighteenth-century man was imprisoned in "Mind-forg'd manacles"(48); his capacity for further knowledge was inhibited, for "Man by his reasoning power can only compare and judge of what he has already perceived" (49). He considers that rational analysis takes away the very life from the object analyzed.

The Church was greatly responsible for this depressing situation, as it had betrayed its mission to point the path of faith to mankind. On the contrary, while fighting against Deism, it gave room to the over-emphasized importance of reason. Reality is "of Faith and not of Demonstration" (50). It was reason which Blake took to be at the root of the preoccupation with morality and the consequent neglect of the well-springs of religious devotion. And this leads to his position on ethics.

### Blake on Ethics

He had a very strong antinomian bias. It was Blake's conviction that Jesus had freed mankind from subservience to the law, or decalogue, and had trodden underfoot the "poisoned rock," breaking all ten commandments; indeed "no virtue can exist without breaking these ten commandments" (51). This shocking statement can be better understood in the light of the fact that *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* may be regarded as a satire on Swedenborg, the Swedish theologian, and his "New Jerusalem Church" which Blake joined for a while. The New Jerusalem Church thought "that in order to obtain salvation, man must live according to the Ten Commandments" (52). In this respect the New Jerusalem Church followed the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the same legalistic pattern of the Anglican Church of the time, which was crucifying Christ "with the Head Downwards" (53). His aversion to moral laws had different causes: one was the idea that legalism is useless spiritual slavery, since the good done from a sense of duty is never good, it is bondage - the bondage of sin. That was the problem of the Pharisees who believed that Jesus' death was essential to save morality. Thus the curse of legalism is revealed by the Cross. "The Gospel - according to Blake - is

Forgiveness of Sins and has No Moral Precepts; these belong to Plato and Seneca and Nero" (54). The second reason is that in his opinion "No flesh nor spirit could keep (these) iron laws one moment" (55), so that men become "trembling victims of Moral Justice" (56). This promotes harshness and repression:

"Over the doors 'Thou shalt not', and over the chimneys 'Fear' is written. All love is lost: Terror succeeds, and Hatred instead of Love, and stern Demands of Right and Duty instead of Liberty" (57).

Finally, the moral law promotes self-righteousness, which was revealed by the Crucifixion of Jesus. Blake believed that "Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules" (58).

So what was Jesus' original contribution to ethics? "There is not one Moral Virtue that Jesus Inculcated but Plato and Cicero did Inculcate before him; what then did Christ Inculcate? Forgiveness of Sins. This alone is the Gospel, and this is the Life and Immortality brought to light by Jesus" (59).

On this point as Adventists we cannot but disagree with Blake. We understand that while Jesus was opposed to legalism, he underlined the importance of the Law (see Matthew 5:17-19). However there is room for reflection: Adventism, with its strong emphasis on the Law, is always liable to fall back on legalism, while the real heart of Christian life, love and forgiveness, may be sometimes neglected. Even worse, we may be tempted to fall back on the old Catholic idea of salvation by faith and works. Concerning the Law as a means to obtain salvation Luther used strong words, not very different from Blake's:

"Wherefore since we are now in the matter of justification, we reject and condemn all good works (...) Wherefore a Christian man, if ye define him rightly, is free from all laws, and is not subject unto any creature, either within or without" (60).

Forgiveness of sins is certainly the central point in Blake's ethics. It comes up in his works over and over again, and while early in his life he thought that forgiveness had to be granted only on certain conditions, eventually he came to the conclusion that forgiveness had to be absolutely free.

Despite all this, he did not dismiss ethical responsibilities as nonsense. On the contrary he emphasized the importance of Self-denial as central in human life. He called it "self annihilation" (61). Man can arise from Self by Self Annihilation and there are four means by which this may be achieved:

"First, by conscious acts of will: thus Blake spoke of 'willing sacrifice of Self'. Secondly, by self-examination. Thirdly, by the practice of mutual forgiveness. And finally by the power of Christ" (61).

So some of the most puzzling proverbs in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* may be explained as we remember that to Blake man is good, not by reason of virtuous acts, but only by living in the love of God. So he could maintain that "Energy is Eternal Delight," and that "the soul of sweet delight can never be defiled," that "Exuberance is Beauty."

Once again we see an aggressive criticism of the strict and passive obedience commended by the Church of the time. In fact:

"Men are admitted in Heaven not because they have curbed and govern'd their Passions or have no Passion, but because they have Cultivated their Understandings (...) Those who are cast out (of heaven) are all those who, having no passion of their own because no intellect, Have spent their lives in Curbing and Governing other People's by the various arts of Poverty and Cruelty of all kinds" (62).

It is not difficult to see in these words an influence of Rousseau's conception of man. To Rousseau man was basically good; it was society that distorted his nature and made him bad. That was obviously a very naive view of the nature of man. However, it was also a reaction against an alleged Christian view where the human being was seen as completely

wicked. Unfortunately many Christians had a very pessimistic and somber view of man, particularly damaging in the field of education.

Blake's view of sex and marriage

Turning now to certain concrete problems of ethics, one problem to which Blake gave a lot of attention was that of sex, because he considered that the evil working of the moral law is nowhere so evident as in the effects it has upon love, which it vitiates and corrupts:

"I saw the limbs formed for exercise contemn'd, and the beauty of Eternity look'd upon as deformity, and loveliness as a dirty tree" (63).

"(...) a Man dare hardly to embrace His own Wife for the terrors of Chastity that they call by the name of Morality" (64).

The law represses love so that it finds an outlet in lust:

"Pitying I wept to see the woe that Love and Beauty undergo, To be consumed in burning Fires and in ungratified desires" (65).

So love is regarded as a sin:

"Children of the future Age Reading this indignant page, Know that in a former time, Love! sweet love! was thought a crime"(66).

However, he found serious problems in reconciling freedom and love within the limits imposed by marriage. He gave different answers in different works as he was well aware of the difficulty of finding a simple answer. At times he seems to advocate free-love, at others he comes to the conclusion that love in any case is selfish and grasping, while in still other poems he seems to understand that the only condition in which love may be enjoyed in peace and security is in the circle of wedded love, as long as it is mutual love and sex is not imposed or experienced as a sin (67).

Finally, we can not overlook his strong social concern about the evils brought about by the Industrial Revolution. He was especially concerned about the plight of the poor and the exploitation of child labor. The two poems under the same title "The Chimney Sweeper", in *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, are a poignant exposé and a strong indictment of a society which, paraphrasing Isaiah's words, honored God with its lips, but whose heart was far from him.

As we observe in "Holy Thursday" (*Songs of Experience*) he struggled against the complacency of his fellow countrymen:

Is this a holy thing to see  
In a rich and fruitful land,  
Babes reduc'd to misery,  
Fed with cold and usurous hand?  
Is that trembling cry a song?  
Can it be a song of joy?  
And so many children poor?  
It is a land of poverty!

Of all the romantic poets undoubtedly Blake was the one who more consistently traced the social problems of his time to the spiritual bankruptcy brought about by the dominion of cold reason. He certainly helped the Christians of the 19th century to become more aware of their moral and social responsibilities.

To sum up, we have underlined some important points regarding his religious and social milieu. They are the following:

1. The influence of Deism in the church and its moralistic attitude.

2. The spiritual decay of the clergy (hypocrisy, corruption, lack of sensitivity and little faith in God).

3. The anti-legalistic reaction of Blake and his emphasis on forgiveness.

We should keep these three points in mind if we want to evaluate correctly even the most shocking statements from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. They can't be taken out of their historical context, though they are meant to tell us something important even today.

### Today's Relevance of Blake's Ideas

This is maybe the most interesting if difficult part of a teacher's work. It is interesting because it makes literature alive and pupils easily understand that it is not an end to itself; it fulfills the aim of any literary work, that is to give a message to the reader. On the other hand it is the most difficult part of the job because it is easy to misunderstand the message of an author and make it too simple or banal; besides that, it is very easy to fall into the trap of communicating only one's particular impressions and feelings in a dogmatic way, without leaving room for the students' development of their own ideas and reactions. However the teacher could say that if the students want to know his opinion on one of the topics, he would be glad to share it. Almost certainly the students will ask the teacher to take a stand on most of the topics. Then it is important not to overdo it, but simply to state one's opinion and share one's feelings.

Finally it is difficult because the ensuing discussion should be tactfully guided so that it reaches not a pre-determined conclusion, which would be seen as a form of manipulation, but something which is not off target, in terms of faithfulness and correctness towards the original message of the author. Hopefully, through well-balanced questions, the students will ask themselves important questions about their lives and the values they believe in. And it is hoped that not only they will find answers to a particular set of questions but also a method that will help them to tackle similar problems in other contexts.

Now I'll list some simple questions whose number may be limited or expanded according to the needs of the class. A few periods should be spent to answer the questions, so that the students will sense the importance we attach to this work. A time limit should also be applied.

Concerning Blake, and his life in particular, the teacher could ask what the merits and the limits of an ascetic attitude consist of; he could ask the students if they understand and justify Blake's eventual rejection of asceticism. Moreover he/she could ask if there are still some traces of it in modern religion. The same questions could be asked about mysticism and pantheism. The teacher could ask if modern religion doesn't represent God as too far away from everyday life, or he/she could ask whether any student has ever thought of God as present inside man (possible reference to The New Age Movement?) and what the danger of such an idea of God could be. As for Blake's aggressive language, the teacher could ask the students what the merits and the limits of a provocative language are, if they ever use it and with what results. Of course the teacher should ask if Blake has been effective in his use of the language to convey his ideas and if he could have used another linguistic register with the same results. Finally he/she could ask what the usual portrait of God is in modern society and then what portrait of God we have inherited from our parents. In other words, is the image of God held by the young Blake still plausible today?

As for the historical context in which Blake operated, the teacher could ask if the students still find a moralistic approach in today's Church and what the merits and the limits are in underlining "standards" next to general principles; students could also be asked to list the main problems they find in the Church and what possible solutions they can see to make religion more attractive to young people. The teacher could ask if these problems lie in the

negative examples of the clergy and if this should automatically lead to the rejection of religion as a whole. Students could be asked to discuss Blake's position on the subject (he never rejected Christianity, though he was a religious rebel), and to comment on the concept of faith. Finally they could be asked to discuss the idea of forgiveness: can it be granted only on certain conditions?

To conclude this paper, one last point. I think we should get rid of the fear of being criticized (as individuals or collectively as a Church). If criticism is public and tempered by open discussion, we can learn a lot from the reactions of our students. True, not all of them will be of the same value; yet we'll get a general idea of the problems and hopefully of their solutions. Instead of being paralyzed by criticism, on occasions we should be ready to accept and even formulate ourselves some forms of self-criticism. This way we'll make sure that our students will regard literature as something quite relevant, a source not only of aesthetic enjoyment but also of provocative ideas. It is quite likely that they will learn literature much better than usual and, above all, they'll be likely to ask themselves seriously, in a natural and almost spontaneous way, some of the basic questions of life.

If the teacher is a person who has a strong Christian worldview, some answers will come up naturally (68), without any needless dogmatic overtone. What I hope is that we as Christian teachers may share our individual research and readings so that we can become more effective in teaching literature as a tool to promote a Christian view of life.

## Footnotes

- 1) F. Pottle, "The Moral Evaluation of Literature", from Selected Essays in Religion and Modern Literature, edited by G. B. Tennyson, Eerdmans, p. 95
- 2) *ibid.*
- 3) L. Ryken, Windows to the World, Zondervan, p.21
- 4) F.E.Gaebelein, The Pattern of God's Truth, Moody Press, p. 64
- 5) T.S.Eliot, "Religion and literature", from Selected Essays, *op. cit.* p. 25
- 6) *ibid.* See also E.G. White, Counsels to Teachers, pp. 133-135
- 7) *ibid.* p. 26. See also E.G. White, Education, p. 17: "It is the work of true education to develop this power; to train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of another man's thought."
- 8) *ibid.*
- 9) L.Ryken, *op.cit.*, p. 26-29
- 10) quoted in the introduction to The Importance of Being Earnest, edited by T.Millum, Longman
- 11) G.R.Knight, Myths in Adventism, Review and Herald Publishing Association, p.153-174
- 12) *ibid.*, p.170
- 13) According to the report of the Department of Education "literature assigned in Seventh-day Adventist schools should: [...] B. avoid sensationalism (the exploitation of sex or violence) [...]; C. Not be characterized by profanity or other crude and offensive language"
- 14) *ibid.*, p. 170-171
- 15) J.G.Davies, The theology of William Blake, Clarendon, p. 78
- 16) Milton, 22.32
- 17) Jerusalem, 4.18,19
- 18) St. Augustine, "De Adhaerendo", from Library of Christian Classic, Westminster Press, vol. VIII
- 19) Marginalia to Berkeley's Siris, annotated c. 1820
- 20) Milton, 3.4
- 21) Jerusalem, 70.19.20
- 22) *Ibid.* 5.20
- 23) *Ibid.* 40.46,47
- 24) Berdyaev, Freedom and the Spirit, 1935, p.207
- 25) Jerusalem, 61.24-26
- 26) Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 88
- 27) Interestingly enough, Blake never rejected the moral message of *Songs of Innocence*. In 1974 he reissued it with the addition of *Songs of Experience*, to form a single book under the title *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.
- 28) William Blake, introduced and edited by J.Bronowski, p. 10
- 29) Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 15
- 30) *Ibid.*
- 31) *Ibid.* p. 16
- 32) The Vision of the Last Judgement, pp.76-77
- 33) Marginalia to Watson's Apology for the Bible, annotated 1798
- 34) "A Little Boy Lost"
- 35) French Revolution, 225
- 36) Milton, 43.37-39
- 37) "Song of liberty", 20
- 38) Vala, 8.226
- 39) The Laocoon group, 1820
- 40) Marginalia to Watson, *op. cit.*
- 41) Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 10
- 42) Marginalia to Watson, *op. cit.*
- 43) Davies, *op. cit.*, p.10
- 44) Vala, 9.246
- 45) *Ibid.*
- 46) C.Smyth, The Art of Preaching, 747 - 1939, 1940, p. 158
- 47) Davies, *op. cit.*, p.12
- 48) "London", stanza 2
- 49) There is No Natural Religion, 1788
- 50) Jerusalem, 31-46
- 51) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p. 23
- 52) "Document of the Conference of April 13, 1789" in Davies, *op. cit.* p. 35
- 53) Vision of the Last Judgement, 1820
- 54) Marginalia to Watson's Apology for the Bible
- 55) Book of Urizen, VIII.4
- 56) Jerusalem, 23.34
- 57) Vala, I, 32-33
- 58) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p.23
- 59) Everlasting Gospel, Introduction

- 60) However, the Law played an important role in Luther's theology: "When a man is thus taught and instructed by the law, then he is terrified and humbled, then he seeth the greatness of his sin, and cannot find in himself one spark of the love of God: therefore he justifieth God in his Word, and confesseth that he is guilty of death and eternal damnation. The first part then of Christianity is the preaching of repentance, and the knowledge of ourselves." Luther on Galatians 2:16, pp.142, 139, 131.
- 61) Davies, op.cit., p. 63; "Forgiveness of sins which is Self-Annihilation", Jerusalem, 98.23
- 62) The Vision of the Last Judgement, p. 87
- 63) Jerusalem, 9.7,8
- 64) Ibid. 36.44-6
- 65) "The Golden Net"
- 66) "A Little Girl Lost"
- 67) "In a wife I would desire What in Whores is always found. The Lineaments of Gratified desire."
- 68) Beulah Manuel, "Developing Christian Values through the Teaching of English Literature" in Christ in the Classroom, vol. 6

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