

The Concept of “Unity of God”: An Analysis of William Blake’s Mystic Poetry



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Abstract

The strands of mysticism can be seen in almost all the romantic poets of the world irrespective of the language they write in or the age they live in. In some romantic poets the mystic elements remain dormant as they care more about other phenomena which is of immediate concern to them. In English Romantic literature the shades of mysticism can be found in poets like William Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Francis Thompson etc. But William Blake by all critical standards can be taken as a mystic proper. His poetry stands evident of the fact that he was a genius whose bent of mind was always towards experiencing visions and building of a strong faculty of imagination. The present paper deals with the concept of “Unity of God” in William Blake’s mystic poetry. The paper would evaluate the concept of “Unity of God” brought forward in Blake’s poetry that will help us further in understanding the concept of God’s immanence. Select verses of Blake’s mystical poetry would be interpreted in the light of God’s immanence thus bringing to fore the concept of mysticism in William Blake’s poetry.

Keywords : Mysticism, Unity of God, Imagination, Visions, Eternal Truth, Extra-Sensory Perception, Immanence.

Introduction

William Blake (1757-1827) a poet of repute was a painter by choice, an engraver by profession and a mystic by nature who was always conscious about the art of poetry as it was a medium through which he gave the glimpse of higher truths to the world. According to Blake:

“It is the greatest of crimes to depress true art and science. I know that those who are dead from the earth, and who mocked and despised the meekness of true art (and such, I find, have been the situation of our beautiful, affectionate Ballads)¹, I know that such mockers are most severely punished in eternity. I know it, for I see it and dare not help. The mocker of the art is the mocker of Jesus.² Born in London, Blake lived almost his entire life there. Born in London, Blake lived almost his entire life there. Being a mystic by nature, Blake experienced spiritual visions that had a sharp effect on his later spiritual personality. Such was the effect of visions over him that Blake used to say that much of his writings were directly influenced by visions as if dictated by an absolute and elite spiritual power. Caroline F.E. Spurgeon says:

“William Blake is one of the great mystics of the world; and he is by far the greatest and most profound who has spoken in English. Like Henry More and Wordsworth, he lived in a world of glory, of spirit and of vision, which, for him, was the only real world. At the age of four he saw God looking in at the window, and from that time until he welcomed the approach of death by singing songs of joy which made the rafters ring, he lived in an atmosphere of divine illumination.”³

Blake’s life and work are a manifestation of the reality of a strong connection between intense perception achieved through a state of expanded consciousness, and the gift of imagination. Throughout his life Blake examined this relationship and seems to have lived for the purpose of translating this awareness into words. Blake seemed to have believed that there was little difference between his own action and God’s will. Blake was confident in declaring himself the instrument of the divine. F. E. Spurgeon says: “...he possessed in addition a philosophy, a system, and a profound scheme of the universe revealed to him in vision. But within what category could Blake be imprisoned? He outsoars them all and includes them all. We can only say that the dominant impression he leaves with us that is of his vivid, intimate consciousness of the Divine presence and his attitude of devotion.

Blake's mysticism was an overwhelming personal experience, giving rise to an intense spiritual desire to which everything else must be sacrificed. His mystical experiences were like wings with which he clove through his own darkness. In these experiences, he aimed at transcending the limits of the world of space and time by means of conceptions which should convey eternal truths. He did not believe that God revealed himself to saintly fools, nor that He could be approached through reasoned argument by means of philosophical propositions. Eternal truths could be comprehended only by "Imagination heightened to vision." Blake was indeed a visionary mystic. He saw visions from his very childhood and reproduced them in various forms through his creation. He used to have visions and the essence of Blake's mystic experiences cannot be examined in isolation from his reported visions. Blake's visions certainly influenced and inspired his art and poetry throughout his life, but the poet appears to have experienced an inner revelation, which not only resulted in an immediate restoration of his confidence, but indirectly led to the creation of some of his profound work. Blake's imagination and visions were a result of his extra-sensory perceptions for he believed the surface five senses are only one of the lowest modes of communication and understanding of God. Blake has given a detailed idea of his sense and meaning of perception in "The Argument" of "There is No Natural Religion". Blake says,

1. "Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception, he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so accurate) can discover.
2. None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions.
3. Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceiv'd.
4. The desires and perceptions of man untaught by anything but organs of sense must be limited to objects of sense."⁵

If we tend to have the application of the said argument, it would make up as, "He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only."

The extra-sensory perception is to perceive by moving beyond the senses and obtaining the answers for one's queries through some higher medium. For Blake, this medium was Imagination; pure imagination that to a much extent could have been the cause of his visions. And to have the faculty of Imagination developed and see visions, one needs not a sensory eye but an inward eye---the eye that could reflect the reality in real perspective and could transfer to the brains the raw material that when evaluated by the brain waves provides one with the wit that in turn could help man to understand not only the God and Nature around but himself too. Blake's verses from his prophetic work, Jerusalem are a testimony of the above stated version of perception. Blake says;

*"Trembling I sit day and night,
my friends are astonish'd at me,
Yet they forgive my wanderings,
I rest not from my great task!
To open the eternal worlds,*

*to open the immortal eyes of man
inwards into the worlds of Thought:
into Eternity Ever expanding
in the Bosom of God,
the Human Imagination."⁶*

Accordingly, Blake is of the opinion that all the time, he remains focused on his goal, the goal of achieving an enlightened eye, the eye of imagination and visions that could perceive to him more than what his sensory eye could gather of.

Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in her book, "Mysticism in English Literature" states: "By 'Imagination' Blake would seem to mean all that we include under sympathy, insight, idealism, vision, as opposed to self-centeredness, logical argument, materialism and concrete, scientific fact. For him, Imagination is the one great reality, in it alone he sees a human faculty that touches both nature and spirit, thus uniting them in one. The language of Imagination is Art, for it speaks through symbols so that men shut up in their selfhoods are thus ever reminded that nature herself is a symbol. When this is once fully realized, we are freed from the delusion imposed upon us from without by the seemingly fixed reality of external things. If we consider all material things as symbols, their suggestiveness, and consequently their reality, is continually expanding. 'I rest not from my great task,' he cries....."⁷

So, we can say, that it was Blake's inward eye illuminated by the faculty of "Imagination," that in reality made his visions broad wherein he could see all the material things of nature and even his own-self as symbols standing in unity. For Blake, commonplace things had their own value as they acted as signs referring to the higher truths. According to Maurice Bowra;

"Blake was a visionary who believed that ordinary things are unsubstantial in themselves and yet rich as symbolic of greater realities."⁸

The thread of this very Unity underlying all the God's creation is the ultimate thing that a mystic comes to see and understand thereby hinting towards God's eternal existence and grandeur. Blake was a mystic of this kind who saw Unity underlying all that existed. The proof of his quality as a mystic is proved by the below stated four lines from his "Auguries of Innocence":

*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."⁹*

The theory underlying this idea is that everything in the universe, animate or inanimate, conscious or unconscious, is bound together in a number of orders, of which the individual members have very definite and significant relations to members of other orders. The value of this theory is that of the argument from the known to the unknown. And the known entity lying with us is the material world and hence, a man is required to discover his spiritual world in this material world and that turns possible when the inward eye or the enlightened eye looks beyond its vesture into the essential spiritual meaning. In even the tiniest of existences all eternity opens out; in the microcosm the macrocosm is always present in its entirety. So in "Milton" we have;

*See thou the little winged fly
smaller than a grain of sand?
It has a heart like thee: a brain
open to heaven & hell,
Withinside wondrous & expansive:
its gates are not clos'd:
I hope thine are not.¹⁰*

When Blake talks about Unity of Creation, he means all the creation of God, including man. Such a belief, has led Blake to visualize Man no different from the rest of creation hence leading to harmony of nature and spirit (The concept mentioned earlier). Blake says in some verses in a letter to Thomas Butts:

*...Each grain of sand,
Every stone on the land,
Each rock and each hill,
Each fountain and rill,
Each herb and each tree
Mountain, hill, earth and sea,
Cloud, meteor and star,
Are men seen afar.¹¹*

The above verses are a testimony of the fact that Blake sees unanimity in each of the God's creation that leads him to visualize the oneness of God's creation. Putting forward his argument, he counts the entire God's creation like grain of sand, stone, rock, hill and mountain as equal as men, rather refers to these as men. Referring these as "men" shows Blake's strong vision of holding all animate and inanimate entities roped together in one set.

And this Essential Unity in Blake's concept of Mysticism goes even farther when he says:

*So man looks out in tree, and herb,
and fish, and bird, and beast,
Collecting up the scattered portions of his
immortal body Into the elemental
forms of everything that grows.¹²*

In the above lines, Blake says that only the body is different that is mortal but the soul running inside different forms is immortal. The soul that runs through each of the God's creation is actually same, the source of which is the Absolute Soul of God.

Aim of the Study

The present paper evaluates the concept of "Mysticism" in general and the concept of "Unity of God" in particular in English Mystic Poet William Blake's poetry...Further the tenets of western mystic

thought have been deduced in William Blake's poetry...

Conclusion

The analysis and interpretation of the verses of William Blake prove his mystical attitude concerning the truth behind the Absolute soul (God). Being a practical mystic, Blake's view about the concept of God is clear. He is of the opinion that the creation leads one to the creator. The nature around with all its creation is a manifestation of God-- amongst all, the highest manifestation of God lies in man. Hence a thread of Unity can be seen running through all the God's creation that lets one to come in terms with Unity of God (oneness of God) and God's immanence provided a man moves beyond his sensory perceptions and sees through his inward eye.

References

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