

IN DEFENCE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT (AGAINST BLAKE ET AL.)

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Since the intellectual revolution of C17-18 often described as The Enlightenment, the dominant intellectual force in the 'western world' and in particular in universities and research institutions has consisted of a) empirical science accompanied by mathematics and b) logic and other branches of analytical philosophy. This ensemble standpoint may be referred to as 'rationalism' or as 'modernism'. It goes back to the ancient world (especially classical Greece) and to the intellectual advances of the Renaissance. Advocates and practitioners of rationalism/modernism have regarded it as obviously the best hope of expanding and improving human understanding of the universe, because of its manifest gains in many domains and the testability/corrigibility of its proposals. Skepticism as practised by groups such as ASKE is an aspect of rationalism/modernism.

However, from very early in this period there has been resistance to this movement. Notably, 'romantic' and other non-empirical strains of thought have competed with rationalism. Sometimes this has involved the continuation/revival of fundamentalist versions of established Christian (and Muslim) beliefs or of popular forms of Roman Catholicism with superstitious elements. Rationalists had hoped that such world-views would be superseded in face of the gains of science and philosophy, but in fact they offer many people more personal comfort than does rationalism, in particular the alleged support of a loving creator and the prospect of life after death. In addition, European paganism, which had largely ceased to function during the Middle Ages under pressure from the Christian establishment, experienced a revival as part of a growing tendency towards 'spiritual' and polytheistic interpretations of the universe (tendentiously supported by info derived from the increasingly successful pursuit of subjects such as archaeology and anthropology). And, as Asian languages and cultures became more familiar in the West, increasing awareness of Asian polytheistic/pantheistic belief systems added weight to this tendency, along with recent esoteric 'offshoot' paradigms such as Theosophy. Reincarnation, not generally regarded as real by Christians, is a salient idea in this paradigm of thought.

I recently viewed a fine exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland dealing with the work (art and writings) of the Englishman William Blake (1757-1827) and of those influenced by him. Blake produced a diverse, symbolically rich collection of works, treating human imagination as providing access to God and to the spiritual universe more generally, and indeed developing his own mythology. He was considered insane by many in his own time but has subsequently come to be highly regarded for his expressiveness, creativity, and supposed philosophical profundity.

Blake's talents are undeniable, but rationalists naturally regard his mysticism with great suspicion. His best known work is probably the poem 'Jerusalem', set to music as a hymn by Hubert Parry and sung by groups as diverse as Women's Institute branches and international rugby union crowds. The poem refers to the unhistorical notion that Jesus (assuming that he actually existed) was in Britain during his lifetime. But it draws, more significantly, on an older story that the probably apocryphal personage Joseph of Arimathea, after witnessing the death of Jesus, came to Britain and in particular to Glastonbury, and brought with him the Holy Grail. This fabulous object was possibly to be identified as the cup which Jesus used at the Last Supper, though there are other interpretations. It became a feature of the Arthurian Cycle of legends and of many subsequent works in many genres ranging from the overtly religious works of the C20 Inklings at Oxford (Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, etc.) to a rock song by the late-C20 Australian band Hunters and Collectors and popular movies such as *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *The Da Vinci Code* and the overtly comical *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. I myself have seen a chalice purporting to be the Holy Grail displayed in Valencia Cathedral in Spain. It will be seen that these matters have attracted and continue to attract considerable (largely uncritical) attention in the popular domain, even though no mainstream historian or other rationalist scholar would positively endorse the idea that the Grail still exists or indeed ever existed.

Blake's poem refers to the 'Dark Satanic Mills' of England, presumably by way of contrast with the idyllic rural English locations where it is suggested Jerusalem was built (contrary to all appearances) and where a new Jerusalem is apparently to be built. There were, of course, no industrial mills in England in C1 CE. But there certainly **were** such mills in Blake's time, and he can be seen here as part of the environmentalist movement against the then nascent technology and industrialisation which has characterised C19-21 neo-paganism and other partly anti-rational belief systems. This is not, of course, to deny the vast importance of environmentalism in face of the pollution of the Earth, climate change, etc. But these reactions to technology have also contributed to the increasing rejection of science itself. Many no longer regard science or logic as reliable sources of knowledge. Instead, people have turned individually and as groups to esoteric and mystical interpretations of the universe. And some have proclaimed that **no** model of the universe, even a well-supported scientific model, can be regarded as superior to another, whatever the state of the empirical evidence; all such issues merely involve divergent cultural belief systems or subjective opinions.

It should also be noted that the term *Satanic* is more specific than, say, *evil*; it refers to the Devil as imagined in Christianity. The mills are apparently not merely ugly and maybe harmful features of the industrialisation which Blake disparaged but are also associated with baleful spiritual forces of great power. This notion arises again and again in later anti-modernist writing, e.g. in C.S. Lewis' 1945 Christianity-based fantasy novel *That Hideous Strength*. Rationalists, of course, do not believe in such forces. But the point is made that even within the spiritual domain accepted by such as Blake by no means all entities will be seen as positive.

Other belief-systems which involve the rejection of science or its replacement by novel or revived pseudo-scientific notions include much alternative medicine, superseded but now revised cosmological ideas such as Flat Earth or Vedantic Astronomy, naïve interpretations of UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft or spiritual entities, various forms of spiritualist belief, some of the bizarre or at least highly tendentious linguistic ideas critiqued in my 2013 book *Strange Linguistics*, etc., etc. The widespread acceptance of such ill-supported ideas undermines the positive effects of the ongoing Enlightenment. (Of course, advocates of pseudo-scientific theories often claim that science and alternative forms of logic actually **support** their views, but typically with little conviction.)

Another manifestation of this pattern of thought involves the idea that artists and such dispose of 'higher' modes of thought than scientists or philosophers and have a more profound and accurate conception of the relevant facts. One artist whose work I once saw at the Lowry Centre in Salford clearly believed that her empirically unsupported non-standard understanding of the life-cycles of stars was superior to that of astrophysicists. (She declined to engage in discussion of this issue.)

It should also be noted that postmodernist/existentialist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva propose analyses of e.g. language which fly against the known facts or simply do not relate adequately to the relevant facts and concepts. And postmodernist extrapolations which directly involve scientific notions are often especially obscure or implausible, as was famously exposed by Alan Sokal.

Skeptics and other rationalists/modernists should not and will not unthinkingly regard **all** features of postmodernist or esoteric – or 'woke' - thought as incorrigibly fallacious or tendentious. But they will warn against one-sided 'politically correct' versions of quasi-factual stories, and against glibly anti-modernist acceptance of esoteric or postmodernist stances. The pursuit of reason and careful investigation of the facts are both precious, and they should not be dismissed or treated as necessarily embodying manifestations of bias or limited imagination.