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# New Perspectives on Paul and Marx: William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Lianna Jean Manibog  
*Brigham Young University*

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New Perspectives on Paul and Marx: William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of  
Innocence and Experience*

Lianna Jean Rose Manibog

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Jason Kerr, Chair  
Paul Westover  
Daniel Muhlstein

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

New Perspectives on Paul and Marx: William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper"  
in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Lianna Jean Rose Manibog  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

This article explores the function of religion in socio-political spheres. Karl Marx is famously against religion in all its various capacities, arguing that it is a tool used by power structures to control the masses. William Blake, the British poet, is also seen as critical of religion, and because of this his works are often read through a Marxist lens. And yet depictions of Blake as a staunchly anti-religious man don't seem to fit with what we know of him and his works. This article reexamines key texts that deal with the question of how faith and society intersect, particularly reading the works of the Apostle Paul through a Jewish understanding. In doing so, we gain a new understanding of religion as a balancing weight that combats the dangers of the oppressive governments that Marx staunchly opposed.

Keywords: Karl Marx, William Blake, political theology, religion, marxism, Apostle Paul

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## Introduction

It is no wonder, in this respect, that the “return of religion” insinuated demands into our thinking today, and this to precisely the same degree that the self-grounding transparency of critique, criticism, or critical thinking is finding within itself both obstructions and essential moments of opacity. By the same token, it is in this respect not as surprising as it might first appear that an ongoing recalibration or reorientation of notions of democratic politics, the freedom of political intervention, and the emergence of new community forms has sought to articulate itself by way of a reworked understanding of the early Christian figure of Paul.

- Ward Blanton, “Intro to A Radical Philosophy” in *A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul*

Nietzsche established the notion that Christianity “operated by fitting up its creations with origins and identities capable of sustaining an increasingly virtual or speculative system of credit and obligatory debt” (Blanton xiv). Following this notion, an economic positioning of the narrative of religion (and particularly, Christianity) is poised for Marxist critique as to its role in society, along with a detailed exploration of its perceived benefits and actual costs to the individual. It’s no wonder then that William Blake seems to be a perfect literary counterpart to Marx’s philosophical writings, as a vast majority of his poems deal with the plight of the poor, the flaws in religion, and the corruption of the governing. Two examples that are usually and compellingly read through a Marxist critical eye are Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” poems in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, published in 1789. These works are often cited as literary examples of the very dangers that Marx cites in his critique of religion, as Blake’s characters are hypothetical case studies of the mind-numbing effects of religion on the social condition. We can see this theme coming through in Blake’s poems via his exploration of the chimney sweep character’s motivations to continue his work as a little chimney sweep boy, an idea that will be explored further on in this article. Marx’s biggest concern with religion centers on the idea that religion excuses or dulls the senses to suffering, thereby lulling the people into a state of faux-contentment, unwilling and unable to begin the necessary steps towards change.

The writings of the apostle Paul are often cited to support this claim that Christianity is a numbing agent, since it was Paul who advised Christians to “suffer with Him to be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:17 NRSV). According to Marx,

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering . . . it is the sigh of the oppressed creature. . . the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, the embryonic criticism of this vale of tears of which religion is the halo. (46)

Indeed, William Blake’s writings are notoriously critical of religion, as the vast majority of his poetry deals with religious settings and contexts in a countercultural fashion. In taking such a bent, he uses much of his work to foreground a critique of certain facets of religious institutions, a reason why Marx’s philosophies seem to be a good fit for a critical conversation concerning his poems. According to George Norton, “Blake attacks the established church for perpetuating these insidious myths which maintain the dispossessed in a state of what Marx would later call false consciousness” (*William Blake’s Chimney Sweeper Poems*). In the *Songs of Innocence* version of “The Chimney Sweeper,” we see a reaffirmation of such a reading as little Tom Dacre finds fulfillment in his life of quasi-slavery via the doctrines of religion. This manifestation of religion is understandably disturbing and captures the reason why Marx is so adamantly against religion of any form — the power for abuse and misuse is boundless. How can one argue against the words of an all-powerful God? Based upon this understanding of religion and its role in society, Marx concludes that religion is an insidiously oppressive institution in service not of a God or of the people, but in service of power.

And yet depictions of Blake as a staunchly anti-religious man don't seem to fit with what we know of him and his works. While his work unarguably diverges from traditional Christian literature, Blake grounded nearly everything he wrote in some sort of biblical allusion and symbolism, so much so that while he is intensely critical of religion in his works, you would be hard-pressed to claim that he was discarding it entirely. As one of his modern biographers puts it, "His early biographers do agree upon a single aspect of his childhood, however, since it is one that affected his entire life — his closest and most significant attachment was to the Bible. . . It has been said that there is nothing in Blake's work which is not first to be found in the Bible" (Ackroyd 25). Blake, who famously called the Bible "the Great Code of Art," was undeniably deeply invested in religion and Christianity throughout his life.

In short, Blake's persistent biblical investment seems inconsistent with a completely Marxist approach; his artistic engagement with religion seems primarily concerned with criticizing for the purpose of reform, a move that denotes a recognition of the potential for good within religion as a whole and Christianity specifically. But when we are brought again back to the words of Paul, telling Christians in his letter to the Romans to "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God," Marx's claim that religion is more on the side of the government than on the side of the people is difficult to contradict. Paul is a hugely problematic figure in this conversation surrounding politics and religion, and the ideas he seems to teach regarding submission and the endurance of suffering are the very tenets that Marx abhors most in religion and Christianity.

Yet, in attempting to critique religion and use Christianity's own words and teachings against it, Marx failed to give full attention to the contextual and theological underpinnings

contained in Paul's statements about submission and authority. And not only Marx, but Christianity as a whole has largely forgotten the setting from which Paul arose — a devoutly Jewish setting. This setting would undoubtedly influence worldview, understanding, and formation of new ideas and teachings, a philosophy that has gained popularity as of late with Bible scholar N. T. Wright and sociologist Jacob Taubes. These men are thinkers who radically reinterpret (or better put, re-contextualize) Paul's writings within a Jewish framework, providing a key assumption upon which Paul's arguments drastically hinge: Christian theology cannot be divorced from its Jewish roots. This "New Perspectives on Paul" movement reconnects Paul with his Jewish education, transforming faith from a passive word into an active movement of revolution and reappropriation. For first-century Jews, theological learning wasn't merely for intellectual purposes. It was to be instituted into daily living. As such, the idea of religion as a dulling agent is in direct conflict with this notion of physically enacted beliefs. "In other words," as Wright notes, "the revised monotheism of Paul and his communities had a social rather than a merely speculative function" (*The Paul Debate* 39); it required not just thinking about religion in the abstract, but applying it to community living.

It is with this understanding in mind that we should approach Blake's poetry and, by implication, respond to Marx's critique; by combining these key pieces with the Jewish Paul, we will see that religion can both be what Marx fears about power structures while simultaneously providing the answer to those fears. And it is in this key distinction that the power of religion in a society is found: the idea that religion is not an institution but a movement. When this is recognized, the people are mobilized into a cohesive unit that speaks to the teachings of the Hebrew Bible who said, "And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12 NRSV). Marx's quick dismissal of



religion ironically strips the masses of one of the most strengthening weapons they have against oppression in any form. But rather than swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction and allowing religion an omnipotent status in society (thus transferring the office of oppressor from president to priest), we need to remember that all power, including religious power, needs to be checked in order to prevent abuse. Blake's voice brings a grounding presence to the conversation around the role of religion within political and social spheres, reminding us that since there is true power within religion, checks-and-balances are all the more crucial. As power rises, so does potential for the great and the terrible alike.

#### Blake, Marx, Paul, and "The Chimney Sweeper" Poems

In reading Blake's poems, it is easy to see how one would associate Blake's works with a Marxist bent, considering Blake's unique approach to incorporating religious language, symbolism, and themes in his pieces. His "The Chimney Sweeper" poems seem to play out this terrifying reality of the dangers of religion in the form of fable, demonstrating exactly *how* ideological manipulation functions when appropriated by governing authorities. In the first poem (*Songs of Innocence*), we see a young boy driven to compliant obedience to the fatal work confines placed on him by a ruling class system. Under the guise of rewards waiting for him in the life to come contingent upon faithful completion of his work here on earth, he silently bears his cross, thereby enforcing the power of the State and acting as a cog in the machine that enables the powerful to remain strong.

As the poem begins, the reader is introduced to a small orphan boy named Tom Dacre. From the outset, Dacre's very name brings to the poem Marxist-economic implications, hearkening to well-known almshouses in London (Ackroyd 126). In the first stanza, we

encounter a young boy who lost both of his parents and is alone in the world, save for the almshouses and his “brother sweepers”. This status primes our orphan Dacre as one searching for a home, calling to mind the religious imagery of God the Father as the ultimate Father. We see the establishment of a perfect opening for religion to step in and aid the boy, following the mandate of every Christian to help the widows and orphans. And yet despite this Christian duty lying upon the shoulders of all professed followers of Christ, it is very clear that no joy comes to Tom and his friends because no one comes to help. This idea extends beyond Tom Dacre’s character and applies to the collective type character Blake creates of the chimney sweeper boy who appears in both poems. Blake writes, “When my mother died I was very young, / and my father sold me while yet my tongue / could scarcely cry weep! weep! weep! Weep! / So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep” (1-4). The double play on the words “cry” and “weep” serves as a tone-establishing agent, creating a somber, mournful mood.

Further on, Little Tom is positioned as more than just a casualty: he begins to fill the role of the sacrificial lamb who “cried when his head that curl’d like a lambs back, was shav’d” (6). The imagery here is also heavily religious, drawing on the association of lambs with Christ. This image of Christ as the lamb serves to remind the Church of the sacrificial aspects of Christ’s mission, and by pairing Tom with this same imagery, he is likewise set up to be a sacrificial offering of some sort: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, / yet he did not open his mouth; / like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, / and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, / so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7 NRSV). This raises a crucial question: if in Christendom Christ’s sacrifice is seen as necessary for the perpetuation of the human soul, to what end is Tom sacrificed?

With a hush and words meant to comfort Tom, we hear our chimney sweeper type character assure him that “when your head’s bare / you know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair” (7-8). After this, Blake writes, “And so he was quiet” (9). In this moment, we see the model for how cooperation and passivity is accomplished: give people a “logical reason” for what is happening to them, frame it in such a way that they come to view it as not an injustice but a service, and they will cooperate. Power wins when people reverence the very ideology that oppresses them. Hence the danger of religion, and hence Marx’s disgust with the entirety of it. Tom never says a word against the injustice of the abuse that is happening to him and passively follows the lead of others who are clearly acting both against his wishes and his best interests in the larger context of the situation, but by pointing Tom’s focus towards the “preservation” of his beautiful white hair from the soot Tom is silenced. And yet the devastating irony of this is that while the “soot cannot spoil your white hair,” his hair is nonetheless thoroughly destroyed. This poetic example demonstrates how the purposeful redirection of the subject’s attention from the larger picture of his bodily well-being to a smaller, relatively unimportant preservation serves to make him complicit with his own ultimate demise by distracting him from the larger evil that is occurring. Historically speaking, it was the tragic irony of the chimney boys as well, as this “mercy” extended to them did not protect them from the dangers of suffocation, deformation, cancer, and sexual exploitation that went along with their trade (Ackroyd 125). This Marxist reading model serves as a template for the following four stanzas of this poem, relaying a dark message regarding religion’s promises and the ultimate fate of man based on these promises. We are told a detailed account of Tom’s dream that night of an Angel who shows him that death is not the end, that all the forgotten will finally be set free to “shine in the Sun” (16). It is crucial to note, however, that this promise is conditional. This vision of pure joy and freedom can only

come to pass *if* Tom cooperates: “And the Angel told Tom if he’d be a good boy / he’d have God for his father & never want joy” (19-20). When we look at the dream as the reason given to Tom for what is happening, and then look at the last stanza depicting Tom rising in the dark and cold of the morning to work as his supposed “preservation,” the message is clear; just as with the framing of the destruction of Tom’s white hair as a mercy was a farce and smokescreen, so too is this promise of a better tomorrow. Religion, in this reading, is a means of appeasing and enslaving via faux mercy. Just as the promise to preserve his sheared white hair was a lie, so too is this promise of joy to come. The poem’s final line, “So if all do their duty they need not fear harm,” is bitterly ironic (25).

In the *Songs of Experience* version of “The Chimney Sweeper,” we see an even more blatant reference to the role of the church and religion in relation to oppression. We return again to a chimney sweeper character, the character type that Blake uses to continue the conversation he began in the *Songs of Innocence* poem. The first stanza begins with a child weeping, and when asked where his parents are he responds that they are “gone up to the church to pray” (4). If we pair the reading of this poem with the first poem, it radically shifts our understanding of this boy’s orphan state. Both parents are gone, yes. But they aren’t gone due to a literal death and selling away, they have been swallowed into a great religious smoke-and-mirrors spectacle. Ultimately, in the final stanza we see the indictment equally hefted against those who use religion to manipulate and those who blindly buy into religion without question (the parents of this second poem). “They *think* they have done me no injury (10, emphasis added)” and yet, in this moment we also see how far the deception truly runs. Not only are the slaves fooled by this lie told to deflect attention, the oppressors use the same narrative to justify their actions to themselves (10). Norton argues,

Both Chimney-Sweeper poems show Blake to be a radical critic of the social injustices of his age. His indictment of desperate material conditions and those institutions which perpetuate them is passionate and powerful, but his greatest anger is reserved for the forces – the established Church, mercenary and uncaring parents – that restrict our vision and prevent us from understanding both our oppression and the infinite possibilities of true perception.

The tales of “God & his priest & King” make a heaven of the misery in a very literal, and forceful, sense by promoting a false narrative that overlies the somber details of the oppressive situation. By reframing the suffering as a necessary evil for this present time, a compliant, passive follower is created (11).

And yet, this Marxist reading seemingly contradicts Blake’s own views on religion as a means of social empowerment and change. Jonathan Roberts argues that “This ‘imaginative’ response was fundamental to religion for Blake because he saw Christianity as the radical attempt to bring about a transformed world of social justice or, in other words, the kingdom of God” (Roberts 15). This view hearkens back to Blake’s roots in Radical Protestant Dissent, a way of thinking that would have taught him that “the righteous must eventually triumph over those set in high places . . . that the old order will be utterly consumed at that moment of revelation” (Ackroyd 29). In this ideology, the parallel between Blake’s brand of dissent and a Judaic Paul are easily apparent with the overriding notion of transformation driving both schools of thought. Hence, the application of Paul becomes not just appropriate, but almost mandatory to a true Blake reading as Blake’s views on religion seem to have anticipated those now emphasized by the “New Perspectives on Paul” movement. In the light of this new approach, Blake’s poems retain a radically different meaning. What if the danger of religion isn’t its

existence, but rather its appropriation and the divergence from its true function as revolutionizing unifier of the people? Even in Blake's bleak portrayal of the ugliest of all possible moments of religious ideology, there exists the hope of change and the possibility for goodness. The idea of religion as a potentially transformative power is seen in Blake's portrayal of little Tom Dacre's dream. "And by came an angel, who had a bright key, and he opened the coffins, and set them all free" (Blake 51). Tom and the children go "leaping, laughing" as their cares are lifted and they are freed from pain. As we explored in the context of a Marxist approach to these poems, this portion is heavily pointed to as evidence of religion as a means of dulling the pain of oppression. But it is important to note that Tom did not see only his freedom in this vision, he saw the freedom and peace of all of his fellow sweepers, nodding to the notion of a communal liberation. Tom cannot be free alone. Even in his dreams and visions, he seems to recognize this truth. The salvific effects are all or none; we cannot be freed except in solidarity, a truth taught in Jewish theology and one that Paul would have himself been very familiar with — a truth that has implications far beyond freedom from "sin and vice," but also a physical freedom from oppressive governments.

### Modern-Day Applications

The tension between "Church and State" is not new to Christianity in the twentieth or twenty-first century; it's the very reason numbers of young Hebrew male babies were massacred by Herod and why Jesus was ultimately sentenced to death by the Jews. In the words of Jesus himself, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matthew 6:24 NRSV). How is one to reconcile responsibilities to two sovereigns? In Paul's epistles, he spent a lot of time helping early

Christians understand how to function within their societies and reconcile these seemingly disparate demands for loyalty. And it is within Paul's writings on the subject that Karl Marx sees a dangerous message: submit fully and without question and you will be rewarded later, nevermind the cost now. It is the very attitude that allows for a compelling reading of Tom's experience as an oppressive appropriation of religious ideology. Paul wrote passages like Romans 13 that call for total obedience to rulers and authorities, while Jesus himself preached that, "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38 NRSV). Marx's concerns regarding abuse of power are even further validated when reading such passages because not only are Christians apparently called to unquestioning obedience, they are also called to embrace abuse. It is easy to see how such passages as teachings found in Romans 8:17 would be used to reinforce these notions: "and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17 NRSV). This echoes what Tom is told in Blake's poem: *if he'd be good he would never want for joy*. This "religious distraction" provides the foundation from which a mal-intentioned government is able to operate, keeping the masses in check with the promise of a better tomorrow, even assigning virtue to their suffering as they could be said to be suffering for their Lord in the same manner as their Savior and Lord did for them.

Furthermore, by giving religion the absolute power of judgement and authority, this system of psychological re-enforcement is nearly infallible; cosmic weight is thrown behind this inculcation of ideologies with eternal repercussions accompanying our actions in response to them. Criticism of this omniscient authority thus becomes "a sin," for who are we to question the wisdom of God? From whence did such arrogance stem? The brilliance of such a manipulative approach is both great and terrible; the people were trained as sheep to lead themselves to the

slaughter, an idea made all too real in Blake's chimney boy Tom. Indeed, Marx argues that "Christianity does not decide on the quality of constitutions since it knows no distinction among them. It teaches as religion must: submit to authority, for every authority is ordained by God. . . . There is a dilemma which 'sound' common sense cannot withstand" (Marx 22). We see this manifested in Tom Dacre's unquestioning obedience to the faceless individuals promising him something they can never deliver.

Many Christians have had trouble accepting such an obvious disconnect between what the Jesus of the Gospels taught and did and what the Pauline epistles say. For Jesus to be so peacefully radical, the call for Christians to blindly follow a power seems entirely out of place. And to tie this idea to Blake, with the publication of his chimney sweeper poems coinciding with time when some of the strongest debates around the French Revolution were raging, it seems hard to reconcile a Blake who bought into a religious text that promoted pacifism. Because of this dissonance, there has been an attempt to bridge that gap of understanding. How else can the epistles be approached? The recent scholarly movement that presents New Perspectives on Paul answers this question by recasting Paul's writings according to Jewish context in a way that radically redefine how they are interpreted, and in doing so, radically shift the meaning of Paul's letters from quietist to revolutionary.

Jacob Taubes points out that rather than taking a passive approach, "Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the emperor", "against unjust government structure" (16). Paul wasn't calling for the Jews to merely sit on the sidelines and wait. This would have been contrary to their entire approach to religion and religious teachings. Wright further argues that "Theology, for him [Paul] and for them [the Jews], is not simply a set of theories to be learned, but a task to be undertaken, a task for each generation, each church, each



reader” (*The Paul Debate* 60). So what was Paul calling the church to do? By examining the impact this new reading has on our understanding of Pauline arguments regarding law and our relationship to it, we radically redefine traditional Christian theology as it stands in relation to Christian duty in the political sphere. We attain a new understanding not only of the Christian duty to which Paul calls the early church, but potentially revise our understanding of the role of both Christian and Jew in the political sphere today. And through this lens, we retain a radically different understanding of Blake’s poems from over two centuries ago as a demonstration of religion as a means of balancing the seemingly opposing movements of materialism and transcendence (answering the question of how to live in this world when we yearn for the next), loyalty, and justice, while maintaining diligence in not allowing unchecked power to grow, even within the church body itself. In pivoting our reading approach to include this new understanding, we achieve a completely retooled argument that shows religion as a means of unifying the people who are not only under, but also running the oppressive systems; instead of acting as an opiate, in this new context religion becomes a catalyst that empowers the people in a movement of ultimate reappropriation and transformation. And thus two possibilities exist simultaneously within Blake’s poems, demonstrating the brilliance of Blake’s writing and the utmost importance of including this new approach to reading Paul in conjunction with Marx’s warning. Instead of a linear storyline offered through the merely Marxist lens, a storyline in which we see no hope for salvation in any capacity and no way to change the end for poor Tom, when pairing the Marxist lens with the New Perspectives on Paul we see a duality emerge, a paradoxical existence of religion as both good *and* evil. This aspect of Blake’s operational “contraries” deserves emphasis, because it holds out hope for the ending that Marx ultimately was fighting for in his critique of religion. The masses are finally truly empowered because the

masses finally truly get to choose — not from a place of coercion, fear, or ignorance but from a place of knowledge, having been given both the ability and responsibility to choose for themselves how to wield the power of religion before them.

That is the nuance that Blake's poetic critiques offer as a means of bridging the gap between Marx and Paul; he allows both men to be right. In a Marxist reading we see the darkest possible uses of a religious ideology (the great depths) which must be diligently fought against. In the New Perspectives reading we see the immense power for true change given to the people via the religious vehicle (the great heights). By joining these we achieve a completely retooled argument that allows the possibility of religion as a means of unifying the people who are not only under, but also running the oppressive systems. Instead of acting as an opiate, in this new context religion becomes a catalyst that empowers the people in a movement of ultimate reappropriation and transformation. And in seeing both of these possibilities side-by-side, a truly responsible participation in both religion and civics is finally possible.

So now the question becomes clear: *how* does religion accomplish this unification and revolution? The point on which everything turns and by which this question can be answered, according to Paul, is the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ:

The death and resurrection of Jesus were the events in which. . . the powers of the world, both visible and invisible, had been decisively defeated. . . For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus and his installation as 'lord' formed the heart of a new politics in which communities came into being that modeled a new kind of human existence. (*The Paul Debate* 18)

While the Jewish community was still waiting for the establishment of an earthly kingdom in the traditional sense of revolution, Paul was arguing the idea that Christ's death and resurrection had

in fact formed a new kingdom and begun a new era in a sense difficult to recognize precisely because it was not traditional. “Christ’s resurrection was not a new religion. Paul believed it was the start of a new world” (*The Paul Debate* 6). This resolution likewise aligns with Blake’s belief in a total revolution, a “larger impulse towards spiritual rebirth and revelation” (Ackroyd 163).

This notion of a new world, a new order, instead of being opposed to Marx’s call to action, is actually aligned with the idea that there is a need for change. While Marx spent his time fighting against religion as an opiate, he was in fact disarming himself of arguably the most powerful weapon in the arsenal for change. But, there is a crucial distinction in this call to change. In this move, the very thing Marx feared as an instrument of evil becomes an agent of both justice and compassion by restoring a fair order while extending a hand of forgiveness and an invitation. According to this new perspective on Paul, the new order established isn’t directed towards the goal of a total overthrow of the current regime. Instead of revolution, the call of religion is a call for transformation — a complete transformation that encompasses personal and socio-political alike. According to Jewish tradition, there can be no separation of church and state, as religion *should* effuse all aspects of life. Thus, through Paul, the argument to suffer with Christ does not mean to silently bear afflictions, but rather to relentlessly move towards a new kind of revolution, a revolution that balanced death with life within the concept of renewal. Upon his resurrection, Christ stepped into the role of ultimate sovereign and began a new age defined by this important distinction:

The new creation bursts in upon the old, but when it sees the old, and when the old sees it, there should be a recognition: the one is not the abolition, but the renewal, of the other. Of course, the renewal takes place, like all renewals in the gospel, through death and resurrection. Hence the persecution, hence too the moral struggle and challenge. But Paul

does not retreat. The new creation is the reality which has already come to birth in the resurrection of Jesus, and which forms the model for, and the means toward, the ultimate goal. (*The Paul Debate* 98)

Jesus, according to Paul, is already in charge. The shift in power has already happened. The fight, then, becomes not for the instatement of a new ruler, but instead the quest of ensuring the redemption of the rest of the world from the fallen state in which they reside. This notion of a new era beginning upon Christ's resurrection overlaps with the era of the earthly; much of the world still has not recognized that the new era has begun, and as such is trapped in an irrelevant past. As Wright points out, Taubes argues that in Jewish tradition, salvific prayers are never individual. Salvation can only be attained as a body, and as such the quest for the redemption of the whole of humanity is raised to a level of utmost importance:

For Paul the covenant language . . . is never, for him, about a charmed circle of friends enjoying a 'salvation' away from the rest of the world. It is always about the ancient divine plan to rescue the whole world from its corruption and decay, to put right the problem facing the whole human race and hence to put right the problem which has engulfed the whole world. (*The Paul Debate* 58)

This perspective does indeed radically shift our perceptions of revolution as compared with transformation. In this light, revolution is dangerous because it always maintains an "Us vs. Them" mentality, perpetually leaving one who is outside of the protection of and bounds of the law. And while outside of these bounds, the alienated party will then become the oppressed, seeking for liberation and another power inversion. This will only perpetuate the constant flux between power parties, and a cycle of oppression and revolution will continue in unending turning.

Furthermore, in relation to the idea that those with a different religious viewpoint are a “problem” to be resolved, we have seen atrocities of the greatest magnitude in the history of our race committed, as those who saw “Christianity as a different sort of religion; a superior sort” used this as a justification for the systematic slaughter of millions. “It should be obvious that this view . . . has been responsible for some of the greatest evil the world has ever seen” (*The Paul Debate* 66). The answer then truly does lie in this notion of transformation, not a transformation limited to those who are oppressed seeking for freedom, but also a transformation including those who are the perpetrators of the oppression. It is only when this all-encompassing transformation takes place that a true balance can be achieved and the power struggle and oppression broken under the reign of the ultimate sovereign — a true peace accomplished.

In this light, Blake’s poems and their unified message are radically transformed, on a small scale beautifully demonstrating the power of transformation available through proper utilization of religion. The imagery of death in the poem is broken by the angel who holds the key, freeing the children from their black coffins. It is important to note that the being who frees the children from death in fact is holding a key. This imagery hearkens to a passage in the book of Revelation in which Christ speaks to his church, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (Revelation 1:18 NRSV). It is not simply an angel, but Christ himself who is able to give the children their freedom. Christ, the ultimate sovereign through whom “God acted to break the grip of the powers and rescue people from them, ushering in the new age” (Wright, *The Paul Debate* 46). Likewise, in *Songs of Experience* the idea of making “heaven out of misery” (Blake 23) takes on a very literal meaning as the body of believers suffers through their turmoil not in the hopes of enduring until they can achieve a transcendence in the life to come, but

instead in suffering as they aid in the transformation that will break the final bands of the powers of darkness and finish ushering in the age of Christ's kingdom. It is certainly a fight, but a fight to rebuild rather than overthrow. Wright says,

Paul's vision of the kingdom, its present reality and future consummation, remained emphatically this-worldly. It was not about humans escaping the life and rule of earth by being taken away to heaven in the future, or by anticipating that with a detached spirituality in the present. It was about transformation, not the abandonment, of present reality. (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 1307)

This shift from transcendence to immanence brings new light to the concept of the Christian struggle and brings an urgency to the involvement of the religious with political processes as they stand today. It doesn't leave the shift to divine power in the heavens; it places the responsibility firmly in the hands of the people involved in the processes as they exist in our current here-and-now. The people with Christ quite literally remake their world, as is promised in Revelation: "Then I saw a *new* heaven and a *new* earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Revelation 21:1 NRSV). Misery and woe no longer exist in this world, for (in a direct inversion of the Marxist reading of the lines) the people have literally, as Blake says, "made a heaven of their misery" (12) by transforming their fellow man and in doing so have gained ultimate joy and ultimate power. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4 NRSV). Nevermore will Blake's little sweep will "weep weep weep weep" (3).

## Conclusion

Both of Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" poems in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* end upon a note of transformation; little Tom Dacre "was happy and warm" (23) after the angel holding the key to Death and Hades, aka Christ, shared the true message of hope. In Ephesians Paul says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12 NRSV). Wright further expounds on this notion: "The ultimate enemy is not any human being or structure, but the dark anti-creational forces that stand behind them and use them as puppets for nefarious purposes" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 1287). And instead of seeing "God and His priest and king" as at best indifferent, and at worst malicious, we see that this turn to the ultimate plan of transformation will quite literally, as Blake says, "make up a heaven of our misery" (11-12), not just temporarily solving a problem for a portion of the world, but forever dispelling the forces that have driven this cycle since the beginning of time through the unifying and transformative power of Christ's sovereignty. This is the crux of the problem, this is what we as participants in the discussion surrounding *how* to reform our broken systems must recognize.

As we've seen throughout this article, it is understandable that critics tend to come to Blake with a Marxist focus. The difficulty with the current modes of thinking in regards to interpreting Blake as *only* Marxist comes down to an overzealous (and ironic) desire to utilize Blake as a champion for schools of ideology, and by doing so they tend to interpret Blake by ironically dismissing the single biggest influence on his thinking and writing, the Bible. Specifically, by incorporating this new approach to Paul's work to reading, to thinking, to participating in civic life and religious life, we allow for an opportunity to critique religion without requiring that it be entirely purged. What's more, we see the *possibilities* and finally

recognize the very present role we play in manifesting either the good or the bad; instead of being objects acted upon, we transform into beings of action. This approach allows for a simultaneous existence of belief in a higher power (a belief held by the vast majority of the world) and a school of critical inquiry into whether that religion and belief are being abused. And this is where the true value lies, because just as religion itself can be utilized to oppressive ends, so can governments and law that began with every idealistic end in mind turn into oppressive states themselves; after all, Blake is an equal-opportunity antinomian; he does not restrict his ideology critique to institutional religion.

Marx was correct. Maintaining the status quo is not, nor was it ever the ultimate goal of the human race and state of society. He was right to feel a sense of frustration with the state of the world as it stood; we aren't meant for stagnation. What he didn't recognize, however, was that his ideas did strongly coincide with Paul's, who also argued, in Wright's words, that

We aren't merely waiting to go to heaven and leave this earth. We are creating a heaven on this earth, as Rome created a larger kingdom in its colonies. Jesus will come from heaven to transform the world, and particularly to give new bodies to his own people. He is the . . . Savior; he is the Kyrios, the Lord; he is the Christos, the Messiah, the Jewish king destined to be lord of the whole world. (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 1293)

The difference that makes all the difference in the approach taken by these two men is in recognizing the true enemy that was preventing this ultimate goal. For Marx, this enemy was the oppressive state, aided by the ideological state apparatus of the church. According to Wright's argument, Marx was missing the deeper issue, treating the symptoms rather than the cause. "Paul insisted that the crucial victory had already been won, and that the victory in question was a victory won not by violence but over violence itself" (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 1319).



The battle wasn't to invert the power structure, but rather to unify the entirety of humanity underneath the banner of one ultimate sovereign who had already conquered the true enemy. The real struggle was to complete the transformation that began on the day of Christ's resurrection. This transformation including the winner and loser alike would ensure true peace, and this transformation would only be accomplished by revising the way people *think*, a task that by its very nature can never be accomplished by force of the sword. Hence the importance of Blake's poetry as a vehicle for this change, bringing about opportunities for his readers to grapple with the issues at hand which during his time included the tensions of the French Revolution, and during our time include political theology in all of its complicated glory. Paul would agree with Blake's *Jerusalem*, shouting "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans . . . I will not Reason & Compare; my business is to Create" (10:20-21). Creation of the new is the ultimate focus of both Paul's teachings and Blake's mythological tales, a religion wildly different from the religion that Marx critiques.

The application of New Perspectives on Paul is crucial to our understanding of how we can responsibly participate in the difficult intersection of faith and governance, regardless of what denomination of faith is in question. Only through an understanding of what the true goal is — a transformation that does not hinge on the principle of exclusion — can we begin to see a shift in a positive direction in the political and religious debates that so heavily influence every aspect of our societies today. While there is no silver bullet approach to this problem, the consequences of ignoring this idea are sobering. As was pointed out previously, this mentality of "Us vs. Them" will never lead to a satisfactory ending that all parties are content to live under. Furthermore, it bequeaths a state of impunity to any who are enacting violence upon those

deemed to be “the enemy.” We’ve seen examples of this throughout history. This system will always result in the desire, and even need for, yet another usurpation.

Furthermore, *New Perspectives on Paul* deconstructs the Paul that Marx was arguing against, as well as the perceived Pauline notions of subservience and passivity put forth in the epistles. Instead, we see “Paul become —suspiciously and in a self-congratulatory way—an ‘early or ‘original’ version of an imagined global triumph” — in other words, a means to a true rebirth of government and society (Blanton 192). The influence of the Bible and its teachings on a wide swath of literature, whether part of the active religious life and beliefs of the author in question or not, is indisputable. The Bible, even as just a secular text, has deeply ingrained itself into our culture and mythological history. This New Paul approach can and should radically restructure our readings of even the most familiar texts, inviting us to reassess our personal roles in each story, just as it did in these Blake poems.

Instead of fighting against the flesh-and-blood men who stood over Blake’s chimney sweeper boys, the true enemies to be fought are the powers of Death, the powers of Hades — essentially the powers of darkness and evil that were wielding these human beings as their puppets of oppression. Powers that, terrifying as it is to acknowledge, all men possess the capacity to act upon. Certainly a bad person can be defeated, but there are countless more who are able to step in and fill their place once they are gone. This is why it is transformation, not revolution, that will lead to true freedom. This is why it is crucial to recognize both the darkness and the light that is accessible in religious organization and vigilantly guard against one while relentlessly pursuing the other. It shouldn’t be forgotten that at one point, the Prince of Darkness was himself the Son of the Morning.

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