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Research Question: “How does William Blake depict the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion that is imposed by the Church in his poems, “The Tyger”, “The Lamb”, “The Garden of Love” and “The Little Vagabond”?”

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ABSTRACT

William Blake, a renowned English poet whose religious understandings are still of controversy, has written in his poems, about the greatness of God and his creations along with the stressful impositions of the Church. This essay aims to show the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion, which is caused by the impositions of the Church, through poetic pathways. Therefore, the research question is:

“How does William Blake depict the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion that is imposed by the Church in his poems, “The Tyger”, “The Lamb”, “The Garden of Love” and “The Little Vagabond”?”

The analysis of the poems given in the research question will be done in order to make certain points. The poems “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” will be analyzed to emphasize how Blake expresses the wonders of God and his creations while the analysis of “The Garden of Love” and “The Little Vagabond” will be done to give the reader an idea of the cruelty and deceit of the Church in William Blake’s day.

During the analysis of the four poems, it is seen that the perception of God is a positive one, with God being the supreme power in the universe that gives life to its creations and bestows his creations with endless resources. On the other hand, the Church

is seen to create a negative perception of religion with its strict rules and deceptive practices. The essay will conclude that the negative perception of religion, created by the impositions of the Church, inhibits the true interpretation of Christianity and casts a shadow on the wonders of God and his creations.

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I.INTRODUCTION

In monotheistic religions, it is believed that a single deity is the creator of the universe and everything within. This creator is the holder of such power that is accepted to be capable of extraordinary creations. These creations are in a flawless, immaculate manner. Accordingly, God (the creator) is the ultimate being with the power to harness the universe. Throughout the centuries, humans have worshipped God (with various names in various religions such as Allah in Islam) and engaged in numerous divine services (such as fasting in Islam or going to church in Christianity) to gain his liking. Gaining God's liking has been important both personally and socially since God has been known for his generosity and ultimate role in the progression of humanity. Therefore, these divine services were an appreciation of God's mercy and generosity on humanity. It is possible to say that religious beliefs have played an important role in the formation of modern day cultures and civilizations with the ancient Greeks and Egyptians being two examples of these civilizations. Throughout history, religion has been something for which people were willing to fight (such as in The Crusades) and die for. Though different monotheistic religions have their differences, it can be seen that there is a single creator that is believed to be the ultimate power in the universe. Believers of these religions live with the realization of their creator and so God (though he may have various names in various religions) is the driving force of the universe for the believers of these religions.¹

¹ The information given in this paragraph is formed by my general knowledge on religion, which is based on the religion and history classes I have taken up until 12th grade.

William Blake, an English poet who himself was christened, married and buried by the rites of the Church of England², is yet known for his ambiguous approach towards religion. Believed to be a religious seeker but not a joiner², Blake has also written about God's supremacy and generosity as well as the perfection of his creations in poems such as "The Tyger" and "The Lamb". The main idea of the research question, as well as the purpose of this essay, is to emphasize the purity and perfection of God's creations in Blake's poems along with helping the reader understand the deceit of the Church in Blake's day by poetic pathways. The four poems of Blake that will be analyzed in this essay are "The Tyger", "The Lamb", "The Little Vagabond", and "The Garden of Love". In "The Tyger" and "The Lamb", William Blake portrays the physical immaculacy of God's creations along with visual aspects of the wonders of his creations while he tells of the cruelty of the Church in the two poems, "The Little Vagabond" and "The Garden of Love". When thought altogether, the research question is: "How does William Blake depict the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion that is imposed by the Church in his poems, "The Tyger", "The Lamb", "The Garden of Love" and "The Little Vagabond"?"

² "William Blake | Biography - British Writer and Artist :: Blake's Religion." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

I. WONDERS OF GOD AND HIS CREATIONS

In his poems, William Blake emphasizes the perfection of God's creations especially with visual aspects that draw attention to the physical structure of nature and all within. The poem "The Tyger" starts with the speaker questioning a tiger with the lines "*What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*" The speaker is amazed by the "fearful" and astonishing appearance of the tiger and is curious as to what kind of a being has the ability to create such a flawless creature. The word "immortal" reminds the reader of the greatness of God and his continuity in the universe. The speaker then asks of the tiger's eyes in the lines "*In what distant deeps or skies./ Burnt the fire of thine eyes?*" These lines emphasize the physical beauty of the tiger by mentioning a "fire" burning inside the tiger's eyes. This fire is so amazing that one can relate its physical appearance to "*distant deeps or skies.*" The use of this metaphor is effective in terms of expressing the awe towards the eyes of the tiger through natural pathways. In addition, the immaculacy of God's creations is once more emphasized since God is the creator of the "*deeps*" and "*skies*" mentioned in the poem as well. In the next lines, the speaker is curious about the feelings of the creator of the tiger regarding his creation. These lines are "*Did he smile his work to see? / Did he who made the lamb make thee?*" The question as to whether the creator of the tiger is amazed at his own work or not, leaves the reader curious because the creator of the tiger, knowing himself that he is capable of anything, shouldn't be so excited about his creation since the

tiger is just a mere organism in contrast to the universe that has been created by himself. Another important point is that the speaker asks whether the creator of the tiger is the one who has also created the lamb. The creation of the tiger contrasts to the creation of the lamb in terms of physical immaculacy and awe of creation. The tiger is a complex, fearsome creature when compared to the innocence of the lamb. This puts a much greater emphasis on the powers of God (the creator), given that he has the ability to create complexity alongside simplicity. This contrast can be made clear through the analysis of another one of Blake's poems, "The Lamb".

This poem in general, portrays the innocence of a child (being the speaker) towards the creations that he witnesses around him. "*Little lamb who made thee/Dost thou know who made thee/Gave thee life and bid thee feed.*" are the first few lines of the poem. In these lines, the child is seen talking to the lamb. He asks the lamb whether it knows whom its creator and the one who feeds him is. The child portrays the purity of his intentions and his innocence towards the outside world by talking to a lamb. What must also be taken into consideration is that there is someone or something that has given the lamb life and is constantly feeding it. Once again, this refers to God and his kindness on the universe. Almighty God not only creates life forms, but also maintains the continuity of life with his generosity towards his creations. In contrast to the complex structure of the tiger in the poem "The Tyger", the creation of the lamb is made to look much simpler, yet still awakening one's curiosity. The following lines, "*Gave thee clothing of*

delight/Softest clothing wooly bright/Gave thee such a tender voice” give a further description of the child’s curiosity on the creation of the lamb. In the lines, the child questions the lamb as to who gave him his wool clothing and tender voice. God’s power to create simple but delightful aspects is emphasized through the mentioning of the lamb while God’s power to create such astonishing and frightening detail is seen from the tiger. God’s generosity is once again mentioned here. William Blake writes that the lamb’s creator (God) has given it soft, wooly clothing of delight and a tender voice. God has bestowed the lamb with such clothing and such a tender voice. These lines, along with reference to “The Tyger”, also give the reader an idea of the harmony in the universe that God has established. The characteristics of God’s creations are in harmony with their physical appearances and roles in nature. The tiger, being a strong and fearful creature, has eyes with fires burning inside them while the lamb, being a simplistic and weak creature, is created with a tender voice. This makes an emphasis on the immaculacy of God’s creations and the balance God has maintained in the universe because his creations have the appearances that perfectly match their characteristics. The reader, who witnesses the existence of weak alongside strong and simple alongside complex, is able to understand how balanced the universe has been created. In the following lines, the child finds an answer to the questions that he has been asking to the lamb. He tells the lamb “*Little Lamb I’ll tell thee/Little Lamb I’ll tell thee!/He is called by thy name/For he calls himself a lamb*”. Although these lines may not mean much in the beginning, the next few lines make them meaningful. These lines are “*He is meek and he is mild/He*

became a little child/I'm a child and thou a lamb/We are called by his name" Now, it is much more clear, what the child is trying to say. The creator of the lamb (God) is also the creator of the child and this creator names himself with the name of his creations. Accordingly, the line "*We are called by his name*" suggests that his creations are called by his name as well. This clearly means that in the child's interpretation, God (the creator) is one with his creations. These lines are of great importance in means of the expression of God's generosity towards his creations but also his control on the universe. The fact that God is one with his creations is an obvious display of God's dominance on the universe because this means that everything (living or non-living) is under the control of God and his every creation is a sign of his existence. God's generosity is also shown here by the acknowledgement that God is "meek" and "mild" and that he gives his name to all of his creations. This leads to the interpretation that God embraces everything that he has created. Additionally, the greatness of God's creations is once again mentioned. If God himself is flawless and he names himself a lamb, then the lamb (being his creation) must also be flawless. This emphasizes the wonders of God's creations. The speaker (child) ends the poem with a prayer in the last two lines, "*Little Lamb God bless thee/Little Lamb God bless thee.*" The gratitude towards God and all that he grants his creations with is expressed with this prayer. Given that the creator of the lamb is God, then it must be God who the lamb is always in need of. This is what the line "*Little Lamb God bless thee*" emphasizes. God is shown in this prayer, as the ultimate power that can

be called upon by his mortal creations. This shows the obvious dependence of his creations to God.

It is possible to sum up the two poems “The Tyger” and “The Lamb” by saying that these two poems use sensory aspects (mainly visual aspects) along with the contrast between the tiger and the lamb (with the tiger being the complex creation of God while the lamb is the simple one) to express the immaculacy and perfection of God’s creations. The analysis of these poems gives the reader an idea of how William Blake expresses the flawless nature of God and his creations as well as the harmony that has been maintained in the universe by God.

III. THE CHURCH: AN EVIL PLACE

Blake writes of the wonders of God in the first two poems that have been analyzed but he also reflects the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion that is imposed by the Church in his other two poems. It is known that William Blake thought that what saved one's soul was not faith, but that it was knowledge³. Therefore, he had a lot to say about the Church, and how in his opinion the church was a deceit. Blake thought of the regular attendees of the Church as people who abused the term "faith"³. According to William Blake, people who came to Church every single Sunday thought that they would be cherished by God regardless of their actions outside of the Church³. This was mainly what made the Church a deceit for the believers of Christianity. The Church was for Blake an evil place³ and he had attended Church three times in his life with these being his baptism, his marriage and his own funeral.⁴ In Blake's opinion, Christ was the peak of what a human being could amount to in his life. Furthermore, he thought that God was not an empyreal power that was something way beyond the interpretation of a human being but that it is possible to say that God and Christ are actually on the same level. For Blake, God was something

³ http://www.emmitsburg.net/archive_list/articles/ce/misc/drew/blake.htm

⁴ "William Blake | Biography - British Writer and Artist :: Blake's Religion." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

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that resided in every human being⁵. An example of this idea is seen in the quote “There is a throne in every man, it is the throne of God.” which Blake writes in one of his works, called “Jerusalem”. The Church on the other hand, imposed a more corrupted perception of religion to its believers. Therefore, William Blake writes of the cruelty and deceit of the Church in his poems “The Garden of Love” and “The Little Vagabond”.

⁵ "William Blake | Biography - British Writer and Artist :: Blake's Religion." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

IV. THE CRUELTY AND DECEIT OF THE CHURCH

In the poem “The Garden of Love”, a lyrical “I” tells of a place that he calls “The Garden of Love” where he used to play on the green as a child. After growing up and visiting this garden, he sees that a chapel has taken the place of what used to be there back in his childhood. The first stanza “*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*” tells of this. From the very start, a negative approach by Blake towards Christianity can be seen here. A chapel has taken the place of a wonderful garden (being called the Garden of Love) that the lyrical “I” would play in back in his childhood. This puts an emphasis on how Blake thinks Christianity is harsh and has strict boundaries because the now built chapel has taken away the “Garden of Love” from the lyrical “I”. These boundaries are further mentioned in the next two lines, which are “*And the gates of this Chapel were shut / And Thou shalt not. writ over the door*”. The gates of the chapel being shut carry a special meaning. With these words, Blake is describing how the Church deceives people who are in need of enlightenment. Blake thinks that one could only truly understand Christianity with knowledge⁶. The Church however, has turned its back on the believers of Christianity (this is what is meant by the gates of the chapel being shut) and made them believe that, in Blake’s words, just attending Church on Sundays would grant the soul eternal salvation. However, for Blake this was just a display, not a true

⁶ http://www.emmitsburg.net/archive_list/articles/ce/misc/drew/blake.htm

interpretation of Christianity. The strict boundaries of the Church are emphasized in the line “*And Thou shalt not. writ over the door*”. Given that the believers of Christianity conform to anything that the Church has to say, the Church has managed to build a wall for its believers in means of many prohibitions. These restrictions and prohibitions are what is trying to be said when Blake writes that the door has many things written on it that tell of the so called restrictions and prohibitions of Christianity. Once again, this puts forth the fact that the Church does not tend to enlighten its believers on Christianity with knowledge but inversely deceives them. This is what Blake complains about. The next four lines “*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*” tell more about the disappointment of the lyrical “I” in the poem. With these words, Blake further explains the deceit of the Church by saying that the innocence and joy of the lyrical “I” back in his childhood has lost its place to conformity that has been imposed on him by the Church. This negativity is shown with the graves and tombstones, which have taken the place of the flowers that used to be there in the Garden of Love. The black gowns of the priests in the next line “*And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds*” could be a supplementary symbol to explain the harsh atmosphere of the Church since the color black brings to the mind a more negative view on the matter. The last line “*And binding with briars, my joys and desires*” summarizes the entire poem. The most important thing to realize in the poem is that there is reference to a childhood experience throughout the poem. As a child, one would be expected to be completely innocent and pure. It is seen in the poem that the lyrical “I” meets this definition. However, he talks

about the harsh and strict interpretation of religion that the Church has imposed on the believers of Christianity and that this has eventually led to conformity. If this has to be put in another way, the Church has taken away the innocence and joy that everyone used to have back in their childhood. This is what the last line of the poem is trying to say. And briars, being thorny plants, add to the frustration of the lyrical “I” when he says his joys and desires have been bonded with briars. Furthermore, it can be said that with the strict boundaries of the Church, one could not go after his desires. This is what is being emphasized when the lyrical “I” is talking about his desires being bonded. The poem “The Garden of Love” helps the reader understand the cruelty of the Church and how the Church creates an unwanted stress on its believers.

The next poem “The Little Vagabond” is also about this. First of all, the word “vagabond” in the title of the poem tells of a state in which one is uncertain of his course or direction. This title emphasizes the state of the attendees of the Church, who are also deceived and pushed out of course. This poem starts with the lines “*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 use’d well / Such usage in heaven will never do well*” In these lines, William Blake complains of the cruelty of the Church. The Church is described to be “cold” while the alehouse is warm and pleasant. The word “cold” asserts the unwillingness of Blake to attend Church due to the unpleasant and strict (previously mentioned during the analysis of “The Garden of Love”) atmosphere of the Church. In

Blake's point of view, the regular attendees of the Church thought that going to Church on Sundays would be granted eternal salvation heedless of their actions outside of the Church⁷. This is what the lines "*Besides I can tell where I'm use'd well / Such usage in heaven will never do well*" express. Blake is trying to say that he is of good use in the alehouse but that this usage will not be accepted by the Church. This puts an emphasis on the fact that the Church has many restrictions and that the little vagabond does not feel at ease at the Church. In the next stanza, in which writes the lines "*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*", Blake tells of how the Church should have been. Although the alehouses were places where men would come to spend their money on drinks and women, the atmosphere of the alehouse was capable of causing joy and forming a brotherhood between the men that came, whereas the Church was as strict as it could be. Blake writes that if there was ale given at the Church and their souls would be regaled, then they too would attend Church and pray all day long. Moreover, they wouldn't even think about straying from the Church. It is told that the Church should have been a much more pleasant and welcoming place for all fellow Christians. If this was the case, then it would have been possible for one to willingly attend Church and pray with a flawless belief for Christianity and keeping away from Church would not have come to mind. The last two lines of the coming stanza "*And modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church / Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch*" mention the effect of the perversion of appetite on the little vagabond

⁷ http://www.emmitsburg.net/archive_list/articles/ce/misc/drew/blake.htm

(representing the children of the time). Blake tries to explain that fasting was something that drove children away from the Church and that they were actually forced to starve and made to think that they were fasting by the dame at Church. Also, Blake mentions that this perversion of appetite made the children physically weak and got them frustrated by saying that if there was ale given at the Church then the children would not be so “bandy”. In the last stanza, William Blake tells from the point of view of the little vagabond that if the Church had a much more comforting and mild atmosphere then the fight between good and evil would come to an end. The lines “*And God like a father rejoicing to see / his children as pleasant and happy as he / would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel / But kiss him and give him both drink and apparel*” express from the innocent point of view of the little vagabond that if people in the alehouse are happy by doing what they do there (drink and engage in sexual activity) then the people in the Church could also be happy by doing the same things. The alehouse and the Church would not be a matter of comparison for an adult, but the innocence of the little vagabond causes a more simplistic approach. For the little vagabond, if everyone in the Church is made happy, then the fight between good and evil (God and the Devil) would finally come to an end. This is expressed in the line, which writes that God would no longer have a quarrel with the Devil but give him drink and apparel instead. “The Little Vagabond” expresses the cruelty and strict atmosphere of the Church from the perspective of a little child and aids the reader in understanding the effect of the Church on people in Blake’s day.

V.CONCLUSION

In his poems “The Tyger” and “The Lamb”, William Blake praises God and his power to create. Blake emphasizes the perfection of God’s creations through sensual (mostly visual) aspects and draws attention to the details that give certain hints of the magnificent balance that God has maintained in the universe. On the other hand, William Blake tells of the cruelty and deceit of the Church in his poems “The Garden of Love” and “The Little Vagabond”. In these poems, Blake depicts the strict and harsh atmosphere of the Church and expresses the corrupt perception of religion that is imposed by the Church. When thought altogether, William Blake shows the contradiction between the positive perception of God and the negative perception of religion that is imposed by the Church. On one side there is God, who awards his creations with life and bestows them with limitless sources. This is bound to create a positive approach towards God and religion. However, the Church imposes a negative perception towards religion. The Church puts a stress on religion with its restrictions and deceiving atmosphere. People are made to believe that they will be awarded with heaven regardless of their actions outside of the Church, so long as they become regular attendees of it. In conclusion, the cruelty and deceit of the Church creates a negative perception of religion, which blinds the eyes to the wonders of God, his creations, and the true interpretation of Christianity.

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APPENDIX

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

WILLIAM BLAKE

The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

WILLIAM BLAKE

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 & desires.

WILLIAM BLAKE

The Little Vagabond

Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;
Besides I can tell where I am use'd 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,

Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing.
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:
And modest dame Lurch, who is always at Church,
Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch.

And God like a father rejoicing to see,
His children as pleasant and happy as he:
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel
But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.

WILLIAM BLAKE