

BLAKE, SWEDENBORG, AND MUHAMMAD: THE PROPHETIC TRADITION, REVISITED

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Protestants should be able to see that the need for a Protestant Reformation was there already in the 7th Century C.E., to be perceived by prophetic eyes. Blakeans should be able to see that there is no way to accept “Again He speaks” in Blake unless we accept that again He speaks in the Koran.

~ Norman O. Brown, “The Prophetic Tradition”¹

Surprisingly—given past and recent rebellions in the Middle East and North Africa—Norman O. Brown’s 1982 essay has not received due attention in Blake studies. He argues that William Blake belongs to a prophetic tradition in which Islam is not a foreign non-European religion but a reformist offshoot of Judeo-Christianity. Like Muhammad, Blake is a revolutionary prophet who, inspired by his conversations with the angel Gabriel, supplements Christianity with a new revelation about the inherent holiness of sex and the body. In treating Islam as a living tradition that anticipated the Protestant Reformation and includes Blake, Brown denies an essentialist logic that ascribes this religion to Arabs only. For him, Islam is a universal response to church-state corruption rather than an exotic religion distinct from Judaism and Christianity, and is therefore not reducible to a fixed set of doctrinal beliefs or to any specific geographical locale.

Angus Whitehead has shown why the prophetic tradition is worth historicizing. Given Blake’s likely encounter with eighteenth-century orientalist scholarship and London’s growing Muslim community in the early nine-

teenth century, he argues that the poet-artist “may not have considered Islam to be exclusively a religion of ‘the East’” (27). However, he does not contextualize Blake’s positive view of Islam in relationship to his religious milieu, even though he admits a possible Swedenborgian influence (42). I argue for the crucial importance of this influence. Read alongside Emanuel Swedenborg’s works, Blake’s scattered references to Islam suggest identification with the Prophet Muhammad and admiration for a polygamous Muslim heaven. Although the poet-artist’s knowledge of Islam cannot be ascertained, given the scarce textual and biographical evidence, I nonetheless offer a necessarily speculative argument based on what scholars do know about Blake’s life-long engagement with Swedenborgianism, which is explicitly concerned with Islamic doctrines and practices. In adopting this intertextual approach, my historicist analysis of Blake’s Swedenborgianism substantiates Saree Makdisi’s thesis on why missing orientalist tropes (genies, eunuchs, sultans, and harems, etc.) in Blake’s works signal a sympathetic reevaluation of the orient (see Makdisi, *Impossible* 209–10, 252–57)—and, I would add, of Islam beyond what Swedenborg would have allowed.

Specifically, I want to show that Blake’s ecumenical prophetic tradition involves the sanctification of concubinage in the Qur’an and Swedenborg’s doctrine on conjugal love, which led to doctrinal disputes among London Swedenborgians as discussed in Marsha Keith Schuchard’s book (234–39). In her groundbreaking work on Blake’s Moravian-Swedenborgian family background, she has uncovered an antinomian sexual theosophy that lends credence to the story (told by the nineteenth-century lawyer and close friend Henry Crabb Robinson) that Blake “learned from the Bible that wives should be in common” and that marriage was not a “Divine institution” (Bentley, *Records* 704–5). I argue that the poet-artist’s polygamous—or more precisely, polygynous—attitude toward the taking of second wives or concubines provides a theological rationale for why his poetry and art exalts Islam’s sanctification of the body.

The Esoteric Qur’an

Literary critics have sought textual evidence for their readings of Blake’s Orient in the passing reference to Mahomet’s “loose Bible” in *The Song of Los* (1795):

The human race began to wither, for the healthy built
 Secluded places, fearing the joys of Love
 And the disease’d only propagated:
 So Antamon call’d up Leutha from her valleys of delight:
 And to Mahomet a loose Bible gave. (*E* 67; *SL* 3.25–29)²

Relying on S. Foster Damon's encyclopedic entries for Antamon (male seed) and Leutha (sinful/guilty sex under the law), Edward Larrissy reads "loose" as "licentious." According to this interpretation, Antamon, horrified by the repressive threat that monastic morality poses to male sexual reproduction ("the joys of Love"), "calls upon the best remaining hope for sexual activity under these diseased conditions: the shame-infected sexuality of Leutha" (10). Larrissy concludes that Blake succumbs to negative orientalist stereotypes in which "loose Bible," an allusion to the Qur'an, refers to the legal sanctioning of sexual hypocrisy: mainly, the Muslim practice of "polygamy, including marriage to slave girls" (although he offers no textual evidence for this latter assertion) (10). In response, Saree Makdisi argues that "loose" suggests that "all religious texts—indeed, all texts in general—are open to interpretation" ("Ontology" 14). In other words, "loose Bible" represents a radical critique of state religion rather than an uncritical acceptance of negative prejudices about lustful Muslims. I am not interested in weighing the debate between Larrissy and Makdisi, because their arguments are equally premised on the false assumption that Islam is a foreign religion that had little or no bearing on Christian prophetic history and Blake's religious milieu (Larrissy's reading does not even concentrate on Islam). Instead, I offer a third interpretive alternative: "looseness" is an ironic self-reference to what Tristanne J. Connolly describes as Blake's porous *corpus*, a loose collection of writings/body parts in which the printmaking process is dramatized as bodily penetration (1–24). Like Blake's handmade illuminated books, the textual body of the Qur'an loosely crosses corporeal, religious, and sexual borders. In this section, I argue that the poet's fascination with this "loose Bible" stems from and elaborates upon a Swedenborgian hermeneutics that assigns a positive prophetic value to an erotically charged esoteric Qur'an.

Far from standing above his age, Blake participated in an Enlightenment program that emphasized Islam's integral role in Christian providential history. This program was inaugurated, in major part, by the orientalist, Anglican missionary, and lawyer George Sale, who in 1734 published a thorough English translation of the Qur'an grounded in Arab-Islamic scholarly sources and not, as in previous scholarship, on medieval Christian legends that portray the Prophet as a vile deceiver. By treating "loose Bible" as a likely allusion to the Qur'an, which Sale calls "a collection of loose chapters or sheets," S. Foster Damon infers that the poet knew his famous translation (259). Through Sale's *Koran*—reprinted in 1795 by Blake's employer, the radical bookseller Joseph Johnson—the poet would have been introduced to freethinking Enlightenment debates regarding the Prophet's status as a wise legislator who restored primitive Christianity.³ As Ziad Elmarsafy has cogently argued, Sale's translation is a polemical work of scholarship that

enabled “a project with distinct freethinking and republican...sympathies” (58). His translation promoted a scriptural exegesis that empowers the individual interpreter rather than the church-state institution.

Prefixed to his translation, Sale’s “Preliminary Discourse” depicts Muhammad as a civil legislator whose Qur’an contains a pristine social morality “not unworthy even [of] a Christian’s perusal” (45). In the dedication, he describes the Prophet as an impostor who nonetheless accomplished a noble deed by giving “his Arabs the best religion he could, as well as the best laws” (vii). Although Muhammad cannot be equated with Moses and Jesus, he is superior to the pagan civil legislators of antiquity. For Sale, an “impostor” who fabricates a new religion based on a monotheistic (Abrahamic) faith is preferable: better to have an impostor abolish idolatry than support paganism (vii–viii). In the context of providential history, Muhammad initiated a “great reformation” in the Arab-Christian world (28). A shrewd politician, he took advantage of the disputes between and among the Greek Orthodox Christians and the Roman Catholics to restore Christianity to its original monotheistic conditions (27–28). God allowed Islam’s political triumph in order to punish schismatic Christians’ decadent morality, reform church and state, and reaffirm Abraham’s covenant (23–24, 26). Despite his professed faith in orthodox Anglican dogmas, contemporary critics accused Sale of placing Mahometanism on a par with Christianity (Davenport xvii–xix).

Sale’s translation sparked freethinking speculations about Islam’s historical role in the reformation of religious and sexual morality. In *Reflections on Mohammedanism, and the Conduct of Mohammed. Occasioned by a late learned translation and exposition of the Koran* (1735), the anonymous author uses Sale’s translation, accompanying footnotes, and “Preliminary Discourse” to vindicate the Prophet and argue that his religion is “an instrument in the Hand of God” to prepare for the coming Protestant Reformation (5, 24). Muhammad, a “true and legitimate prophet,” acted under divine providence when, anticipating Luther, he challenged clerical power and icon worship in the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches (22). He “laid the foundations of a general and thorough Reformation, Conversion, and Re-union in ages to come” (50). Moreover, his Protestant-style reformation entailed an eroticized understanding of paradise and bodily resurrection after Judgment Day. As a “natural Reasoner” deprived of true Christian revelation, Muhammad cannot be faulted for describing the spiritual world by analogy to the corporeal, a natural theology that was concocted with the help of “Talmudical Jews and Apocryphal Christians” (43–44). Thus “there is nothing so very monstrously absurd...in what he vaunts of his sensual Paradise” (44). Since Sale’s translation, the Prophet’s eroticized recuperation of a reformed biblical tradition—in the form of the Qur’an,

a “loose Bible”—offered heretical Christians an opportunity to sanctify human sexuality in Protestant theology.

Indeed, the Swedish scientist and mystical prophet Emanuel Swedenborg, an influential figure for Blake, was invested in such a project. In his esoteric writings on Mahometanism, Swedenborg sees the Islamic prophetic tradition as a divinely ordained response to the fallen Christian churches, which after the 325 AD Nicene Council became corrupted by worshipping the graven image. He sympathizes with Islam as an orientalized Christianity that rejects the idolatrous Trinity or tritheism (the belief in three gods) (*Continuation* 61; *Philosopher's* 488). Saved Muslims in the spiritual afterlife are more Christian than corrupted Trinitarians: “Mohammedans who are saved acknowledge the Lord [Christ] to be one with the Father, and almost hate Christians because they make three gods” (*Diary* 5.159). In *A Philosopher's Note Book*, Swedenborg writes “the Mohammedan religion contains representations,” followed by his brief Latin translation of Gemelli Careri's positive description of Muslim beliefs and practices, including Sufi dervishes, in the *Voyage du Tour du Monde* (1719) (*italics original*) (487). For Swedenborg, Islam is “representative” in that it contains an internal figurative meaning used for preparing receptive initiates for spiritual regeneration: “Representations...are mysteries which are the more agreeable to God in the degree that in them the human mind venerates and adores things divine and spiritual” (*Philosopher's* 259). These mysteries can be grasped only through the science of correspondence and representation: the study of the divine signs prior to the separation of the natural and spiritual worlds due to humanity's fall into idolatrous corruption. The “People of the East” (primarily in Tartary and Central Asia) practiced this ancient science, which was forgotten in Christian Europe. The Prophet Muhammad restored it among the idolatrous nations, even though his followers must eventually convert to Christianity because their natural religion deprives them of true salvation (*White Horse* 50–51). According to Swedenborg, Islam “was raised up of the Lord's divine providence, and accommodated...to the genius of the orientals, to the end that it might destroy the idolatries of so many nations, and might give to it's professors some knowledge of the Lord [Christ], before they came into the spiritual world” (*Delights* 333).

This iconoclastic mission potentially includes the conversion of corrupted Trinitarians, whose distorted doctrines the Mahometans mistakenly assume to be a vulgar idolatry or tritheism (*True* 702–3). In his journal, Swedenborg notes that the Muslims of the spiritual world wish they could be Christians (but are prevented from becoming so due to their previous earthly attachment to “Mohammed”), and that they are “gradually led to the Lord” through their sincere and just piety: “those who live in justice and in their

own good, are able to be better than Christians, because these take away all Divinity from the Lord" (*Diary* 5.7). Unlike Catholics and Protestants who are insincere and unresolved in their faith, these Muslims acknowledge a divine Christ because they know him, erroneously yet sincerely, as "the Grand Prophet, the Son of God and the wisest of men." Thus, "Mohammedans think better about the Lord, in their heart, than Christians do" (7). For Swedenborg, religious conversion is a two-way process: Christianized Muslims can help Islamicize Christians.

That these Muslims live a sensual lifestyle on earth and in the afterlife does not prevent their sincere love of the Lord. "[D]evoted to Venus and her delights," they could teach sexually repressed Christians about the erotic basis of spiritual vision, how "the pleasure of paradise consists in embracing and kissing most beautiful women" and "that the soul and body are conjoined even to the end of the world" (*Philosopher's* 488). Hence, Muslim "Asiatics," who have preserved the Christian religion, are no more "enemies" of the Abrahamic faith than schismatic Christians:

[Muslims'] paradise, and the wine which they will drink, and the women whom they will kiss, represent the pleasures of paradise. Thus the Sacred Scripture frequently says that we will sup with Abraham; that hell will be fire; and many other things which are representations. For without comparison with things natural we remain ignorant of spiritual correspondences. We are natural, and, in respect to things spiritual, the soul does not communicate with the body intelligibly. Therefore the Christian religion is accommodated to the manners and genius of the Asiatics. Who believes that by means of Mohammed, God wished to destroy so many myriads of souls? or that they are enemies to Christians? I do not know that they are any more ferocious enemies than the schismatics of the Christian religion. (*Philosopher's* 489)

Qur'anic teachings are faithful to the "Sacred Scripture," which understands the spiritual by analogy to the sensual and corporeal. According to Swedenborg's correspondence theory, the natural world contains recoverable traces of the spiritual world known to the "genius of the Asiatics," not European intellectuals. As a faith grounded in the heart rather than the head, Islam offers a tantric theosophy in which sexual intercourse between husband and wife prefigures paradise as revealed in the Bible. For Swedenborg, Christians and Muslims are not essentially different, except that the latter are barred from entering the Christian (although not Muslim) heaven because the practice of Islamic polygyny deprives them of the mystical union with God available only in monogamous conjugal love (*Continuation* 60–61; *Delights* 331–34). At any rate, he imagines Islam as having recuperated the erotic spirituality that has been repressed and deemed sinful by church authorities since the fourth century.

Swedenborg's esoteric interpretation of Islam helps provide a nuanced perspective on *The Song of Los*. Mahomet's "loose Bible"—although corrupted by Urizen—recovers the erotic spirituality prohibited by the diseased and body-denying morality of Christian monasticism, for "The human race began to wither" and build "Secluded places" in fear of sexual enjoyment *after* Jesus received his Gospel. Like Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, "Brama in the East," and Christ, Mahomet has inherited Urizen's oppressive system of rationalization: "Abstract" laws and philosophies that have corrupted Los "the Eternal Prophet" (*E* 67; *SL* 3.1–19). The prophets' teachings are distorted by repressive state institutions: the "Churches," "Hospitals," "Castles," and "Palaces" that are "Like nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity" (*E* 67; *SL* 4.32–33). For Blake, Islam is a product of repressive state power, but so are all religious philosophies including Christianity.

Blake's allusion to the Qur'an can only make sense in the context of the worldwide Urizenic corruption that culminates in Jesus's "Gospel":

Times rolled on o'er all the sons of Har, time after time
 Orc on Mount Atlas howld, chain'd down with the Chain of Jealousy
 Then Oothoon hoverd over Judah & Jerusalem
 And Jesus heard her voice (a man of sorrows) he recievd
 A Gospel from wretched Theotormon. (*E* 67; *SL* 3.20–24)

Postlapsarian history since "Har," a corrupted Adam figure representing decadent poetry and self-love, involves the Promethean imprisonment of Orc, a symbol of revolutionary energy chained by jealousy (Damon 174). The enchained Orc image recalls Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), in which a jealous Theotormon refuses to acknowledge the enslaved Oothoon's free love owing to his patriarchal biases. Coming from Theotormon, the canonical gospel allegorizes jealous torment, female slavery, and repressed desire under a patriarchal state religion; although Jesus, "a man of sorrows," sympathizes with her plight, his "Gospel" denies Oothoon's call for sacred sexuality outside the monogamous marriage institution (Damon 308). In this context, Mahomet's "loose Bible" functions as a reformist response to Jesus's "Gospel." The idea that Leutha, symbolic of sexual sin and guilt, produced the Qur'an for Antamon, male sexual reproduction, suggests two interpretive possibilities.

First, the "loose Bible" is another instance of biblical-patriarchal repression. In *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) plate 14, which proceeds "Africa" and "America" in Blake's epic sequence, Leutha represents postlapsarian love combined with feminine innocence: she is the "lureing bird of Eden" (a

satanic temptress), a “Soft soul of flowers,” and a “smiling pestilence” whose “blushing light” and “sweet perfumes” symbolize diseased yet attractive love, shame, and sin (*E* 65; *Europe* 9, 11–12, 14). Her “Seven Churches” love Antamon, who floats “upon the bosomd air: / With lineaments of gratified desire” (*E* 66; *Europe* 18–19). Consistent with his image as a fructifying cloud in *The*, his “gratified desire” awaits, ironically, to be consummated sexually on earth (Damon 24): “My Antamon the seven churches of Leutha seek thy love” (*E* 66; *Europe* 14.20). Leutha’s shame, guilt, and sin seek Antamon, the male reproductive seed (“prince of the pearly dew”) to be institutionalized in the “Seven Churches,” a biblical allusion to the corrupt churches of Asia condemned in Revelation (15). Monastic Christianity, a fallen state religion, deems male reproduction shameful and sinful. Islam repeats postlapsarian-biblical history when Mahomet received a “loose Bible” from Leutha upon Antamon’s request, except that this time state religion further represses female desire instead. The near rhyme Leutha/loose suggests that the Prophet’s law—overturning Christian celibate ideals by sanctifying marital sex—hypocritically denied female sexuality. Ironically, Leutha’s “valleys of delight” (vaginal imagery) are exalted in the Qur’an only to be codified and repressed under Antamon’s patriarchal impulse. Thus, the colon preceding “And” indicates that the act of receiving a “loose Bible” is synonymous with Antamon summoning Leutha away from her sexual pleasure: “So Antamon call’d up Leutha from her valleys of delight: / And to Mahomet a loose Bible gave” (*E* 67; *SL* 3.28–29).

However, these lines also allow for a positive reading: like Blake’s prophetic books, the Qur’an offers a radical Protestant critique of Christian celibacy. Only Islam makes the first (but unsuccessful) attempt to escape the postlapsarian spiral of repressed sexual desire. Read in the context of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* rather than in plate 14 of *Europe*, Leutha acquires another symbolic register that Damon overlooks in his dictionary entry. “Leutha’s vale” offers Oothoon a prelapsarian state in which she freely pursues her virgin pleasures. She seeks and plucks flowers (symbolic of the female genitals) before Bromion raped her with his “thunders,” which “tore / My virgin mantle in twain” (symbolic of the penetrated hymen) (*E* 45; *VDA*, iii.4, 7–8). Because of her “virgin fears,” she hid from her beloved Theotormon in Leutha’s vale, wary of his advances yet “not ashamed” of her sexuality (iii. 2–3). In *Visions*, Leutha does not symbolize sin, guilt, and shame under the law. On the contrary, Oothoon’s Leutha-inspired sexuality exalts sinless polygynous love: she promises to overcome the “self-love” of “the frozen marriage bed” by bringing to her husband “girls of mild silver,” watching “their wanton play / In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon” (*E* 50; *VDA* 7.21–22, 24–26). Oothoon promises to

capture these girls in "silken nets and traps," an image recalling Urizen's repressive corruption of prophetic vision (23). Nevertheless, prelapsarian Leutha plays a crucial role in *The Song of Los* because Theotormon's denial of Oothoon's extra-marital desire forms the backdrop under which Jesus received patriarchal laws. Whereas his Theotormon-given gospel sanctions marital enslavement, Mahomet's Leutha-given "loose Bible" returns to a polygynous Eden (Paradise) even as this act repeats Urizenic history. However unsuccessful in escaping postlapsarian repression, the Qur'an at least recognizes the uninhibited sexuality championed by Oothoon and denied by Theotormon.

According to Sale's "Preliminary Discourse," Islam differs from Christianity mainly in its conception of the afterlife and Judgment Day, in which both men and women freely partake in (extra-marital) sexuality as Adam and Eve did in Eden before the fall (60, 72-73). Drawing on Sale, Blake may be alluding positively to the sensuality of the Islamic paradise, as well as to the Qur'anic injunction against monasticism and inhibited sexual pleasure in marriages. He may have found Islam's sacramental acceptance of eroticism within legitimate social rules partly appealing, because it admits a tantric perspective in which marital union prefigures paradise akin to Swedenborg's doctrine of conjugal love (see Glassé 312, 414-15). Nonetheless, his reference to Mahomet's "loose Bible" does not directly allude to Oothoon's polygynous love, which can be inferred (but not substantiated) only through an intertextual reading of Leutha's prelapsarian state in *Visions*. The question of Islamic polygyny remains unarticulated in *The Song of Los*—a crucial omission that I will examine toward the end of this essay.

At any rate, the two interpretations of "loose Bible" I have proposed are not mutually contradictory. They parallel the Swedenborgian distinction between a literal meaning and a corresponding figurative one, between the natural world of repressed sexuality (the exoteric Qur'an) and the spiritual world of free conjugal love (the esoteric Qur'an). This hermeneutical distinction grants the receptive initiate the possibility of reading non-Christian texts as the prophetic continuation of an antinomian biblical tradition, one in which successive revelations progressively abrogated the moral law against the practice of sacred sexuality. Hence, Mahomet received a "loose Bible," not a "loose Koran." For Blake, Swedenborg, and many freethinkers interested in Sale's translation, Islam is a biblical (Abrahamic) religion whose teachings on sex in this world and the next provide a corrective counterweight to Christian asceticism. Insofar as the Qur'anic corpus is a "loose" version of the Bible, it serves as an inspirational prototype for Blake's prophetic penetration of the porous body, corporeal and textual.

Mahomet, the Poet Prophet

Blake's engagement with Islam entails a Swedenborgian hermeneutics that posits an intimate connection between the natural and spiritual, body and soul, hell and heaven. His indebtedness to Swedenborgianism is undeniable. Blake owned and annotated the Swedish prophet's *Heaven and Hell*, *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, and *Divine Providence*. Moreover, he and his wife Catherine attended the Eastcheap conference of the New Jerusalem Church held April 13–17, 1789, in which they signed a circular letter in support of forty-two propositions justifying the need to separate from the Church of England. As evident in Blake's engaged critique of Swedenborgianism, in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–1793), for its acceptance of Anglican authority and liturgical practices (among other issues), he was thoroughly invested in Swedenborgian concepts and doctrines.⁴ As Morton Paley concludes, "Swedenborg was much in Blake's thoughts in the nineteenth century, sometimes as a source of ideas and of subject matter, sometimes as a promulgator of ideas to be opposed, but in either respect as a powerful intellectual force" ("New Heaven" 82). While acknowledging Swedenborg's continuing influence on Blake, I argue that the poet-artist's Visionary Head of Mahomet (figure 1) significantly deviates from the Swedish prophet's positive yet exoticized representation of a dark-skinned Mahomet.

Based mostly on famous subjects from British, biblical, and classical history, Blake's 187 pencil drawings of the Visionary Heads are based on theosophical visions that he actually saw—not remembered or invented—sometime between 1819 and 1825 (Paley, *Traveller* 300–4). Drawing on phrenological evidence that Blake could have incorporated in his sketches, Angus Whitehead has convincingly shown that Mahomet's head is "an atypical, positive representation of the Prophet of Islam" (38). The Prophet's prominent forehead and upper temple, Whitehead points out, indicate the benevolent, compassionate, and charitable dispositions of great religious persons as examined in James De Ville's *Outlines of Phrenology: An Accompaniment to the Phrenological Bust* (1821, 1828) (38). Although Blake sketches many historical figures in unlikely guises, his depiction of a beardless young Muhammad is not whimsical. According to Muslim accounts, the Prophet received the Qur'anic revelation from the angel Gabriel before his forties (see Glassé 321). Blake's knowledge of Islamic history cannot be ascertained, and yet his interest in prophetic youthfulness is in itself significant when read in the context of *The Song of Los*. The artist stresses Muhammad's humanity before his career as a prophet-legislator, before Islam's repressive codifica-

tion as a moral-legal discipline, before he received a “loose Bible.” As such, the Mahomet sketch recalls the antinomian theosophy of Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufi mystics, who in their dream visions saw God as a beautiful and



Figure 1. William Blake, *Mahomet*, 1819-1825. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Gift of F.B. Vanderhoef, Jr.

sensual, clean-shaven young man (Palacios 266–67).

Moreover, Mahomet's physical appearance resembles the younger Blake if compared with Thomas Phillips's 1807 oil portrait (figure 2). George Bentley notes the parallel features found in these two images, drawing attention to the striking similarities in the calm facial expression, tight lips, curly hair, and penetrating gaze (*Supplement* xxvii). Indeed, the retreating forehead evident in both portraits suggests a shared religious sensibility. These features are not present in the other sketches of the Visionary Heads. The sketches were accompanied with the following words written at the bottom of the pages: "All Genius Varies Thus" (81–82). Blake's Mahomet manifests the "Poetic Genius" of all religions. In *All Religions are One*, Blake writes "The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nations different reception of the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy" (*E* 1). Even "The Jewish & Christian Testament" derives from the Poetic Genius because the essence of oneness is in "the same infinite variety." The "Divine Image" exists in the "heathen, turk or jew"; the lower case letters signify unity in diversity (*E* 13; "The Divine Image" 18). Akin to the Sufi interpretation of *tawhid* (the all-inclusive unity of God), Muhammad's "Spirit of Prophecy" entails oneness in the living body of the poet-artist.⁵ Blake's Islamized self-portrait sketch literalizes the egalitarian identification between poet and prophet, body and soul, as expressed in the biblical epigraph to *Milton*: "Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets" (*E* 96; 1.17).

His positive representation of Muhammad is not atypical when compared to the Islamic-inflected theosophy recuperated in Swedenborg's mystical writings. Although the Mahomet sketch violates Sunni Muslim prohibitions against making images of the Prophet, not to mention the insulting insinuation that he is a poet or *Shā'ir* (a possessed soothsayer according to the Qur'an),⁶ Blake's visual representation exalts Muhammad's prophetic status as understood by Gnostic Christians, Jews, and Muslims. According to Norman O. Brown, theosophical vision—in which to see God is to be God—is a creative act of the imagination indispensable for achieving mystical union, an artistic epiphany in which the divine name is rendered visible in an appearance of God's essential oneness ("Prophetic" 377). In *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, Henry Corbin (one of Brown's main sources) defines this Gnostic theosophy as "the mental or visionary penetration of an entire hierarchy of spiritual universals": the hidden meaning of events and the cosmos grasped only through artistic imagination (gnosis), not logic or reason (38). Condemned by orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims for centuries, this visionary knowledge was rediscovered by Shi'ite Gnostics and Sufis and then elaborated in Swedenborg's prophecies. It requires interpreting sacred texts in the present sense of spiritual universals rather



Figure 2. William Blake by Thomas Phillips, 1807. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

than within a historicist framework that reduces the meaning of divine revelation to a dead past. The Bible and the Qur'an are therefore living prophecies that unite humanity's present fallen materiality with the spiritual. Prophetic revelation is successive, creative, and visceral (Corbin 90–91, 101). In radical versions of Shi'ite Islam, prophecy is art: the Seal of Muhammad's prophecy is reaffirmed as the further illumination of Allah's Word in the material world (Woodman 23). As in Blake's fleeting reference to the

porous or “loose Bible,” the name “Mahomet” that identifies his self-portrait sketch renders divine oneness (*tawhid*) visible in the permeability of bodily borders. To see the Islamic Prophet is to become him literally and embody him in your own living flesh. As Blake cryptically observes in an 1805 letter to William Haley, “Receiving a Prophet As Prophet is a Duty which If omitted is more Severely Avenged than Every Sin & Wickedness” (*E* 767; Letter 61).

Swedenborg’s personal encounter with “Mahomet” in the spiritual world epitomizes this theosophical identification with him. In *A Continuation on The Last Judgment*, Swedenborg records a vision in which “Mahometans” are allowed into heaven—facing East “behind the Papists in the West, and form a Kind of Circle round them”—because of their iconoclastic belief in God’s oneness (58). However, they adopt a subordinate position to Christians because they cannot accept Christ as one with the Father. In this hierarchal-spiritual geography—in which Protestants, followed in order by Catholics, Muslims, and heathens, are closest to the divine center in the West—Mahomet guides his faithful followers “beneath” the “Christian Center” (59). This Mahomet is not the real historical person who received the Qur’an but a shape-shifting substitute who adopts worldly appearances. Swedenborg stresses this substitute Mahomet’s hybrid identity: the Islamic Prophet appeared, momentarily, as “a Native of Saxony, who, after being taken a Prisoner by the Algerians, became a Mohometan” (59). Read esoterically in the present context of the eighteenth century, this Prophet registers the fluidity of national and religious differences as evident in Englishmen who converted to Islam, forcefully and voluntarily, after having been captured by Algerian pirates in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, sometimes off the English coast.⁷

Contrary to my reading of Blake’s “Mahomet” self-sketch, Swedenborg’s Anglicized Prophet-turned-Turk emphasizes his reconversion to Christianity:

[A]s he had also been a Christian, he was instigated to speak to them concerning the Lord, that he was not the Son of Joseph, as they had believed in the World, but the Son of God himself; by which Means he insinuated into them an Idea of the Unity of the Lord’s Person and Essence with the Father. This Mahomet was afterwards succeeded by others, who were instigated to speak in like Manner: Hence many of them are drawn to the true Christian Faith concerning the Lord.... (*Continuation* 59)

Proselytizing to his followers, this Christianized Mahomet teaches that Christ the Son of God is one with the Father and not a human prophet, the son of Joseph. In this case, Swedenborg uses this hybrid Mahomet not

as a means of revealing *tawhid* but as a mouthpiece for ventriloquizing his theological views on the Trinity, the resurrection, and marriage. Displaying little or no opposition, the Mahometans of the spiritual world can only agree with Swedenborgian doctrines. In Swedenborg's and Blake's theosophical visions, to see the Prophet is to identify with his mission, except that for the former this does not imply an affirmation of unity in religious diversity. Unlike Blake, Swedenborg identifies with the Islamic Prophet in order to subsume and thereby deny this diversity under a self-confirmed Christian doctrine.

Moreover, Swedenborg records a negative representation of "the real Mahomet who wrote the Alcoran" (*Continuation* 59). Unlike his spiritual Christian twin, the "real Mahomet" was ousted from his place near the Catholics, "let down on the right Side towards the South," for acting as if he were God in order to manipulate his deceived followers. Swedenborg sees him in a dead material form, "like to corporeal Spirits, who have no interior Perception; his face was of a dusky Complexion" (60). The Prophet's "dusky Complexion" marks the tawny or black skin color of those who, like him, are geographically "near the south," either in Southern Europe (Italy) or outside European Christendom. While most eighteenth-century scientific and literary taxonomies compared Muslims to white Europeans, some also described Asiatics and North African Moors as sooty, sallow, or dusky complexioned, one physical trait among others that did not always imply racial inferiority. After the mid 1700s, Muslims' clothing, disposition, and government became more important markers of racial difference than skin color (Wheeler 148–53). For Swedenborg, black Africans are more receptive to the divine influx than most Christians (*Continuation* 65–67). Hence, Mahomet's "dusky" facial appearance does not, by itself, symbolize Muslim inferiority.

Rather, his southern/non-European (Italian, North African) geography—commonly associated with hot climates and excessive lust—is what racially differentiates him from civilized northern Europeans. Even though Swedenborg notes that Muslims have a more accurate understanding of the afterlife's sensual pleasures than most Christians, he admits that oriental people are incapable of acquiring true spiritual vision owing to their unholy polygynous disposition: "The Reason why a more internal Religion was not propagated among them by Mahomet, was on Account of Polygamy, which exhales an unclean Sphere towards Heaven" (*Continuation* 61). The Muslims of the spiritual world "perceived the Justice" of Swedenborg's doctrine of mystical monogamous marriage and admitted that Mahomet instituted polygyny for practical reasons only: "that Polygamy was permitted them, because they were Orientals, who without such Permission would

have burned with the Lust of filthy Adulteries more than Europeans, and so have perished" (63). For Swedenborg, Europeans have the capacity to restrain their extra-marital desires whereas "Orientals" do not. To bring them to monotheism, the Prophet had to sanction an uncivil sexual practice that renders the "real" Mahomet dusky-colored, southern/non-European, and salvation-deprived.

The Visionary Head of Mahomet does not subscribe to Swedenborg's dual vision of the Islamic Prophet: the spiritual person from Saxony who faces east above the Lord, and the material person near the south, dark-faced and outside the Lord. If anything, Blake's image represents the former, except that his Prophet exists in the material world as an English individual—the young poet-artist. Unlike Swedenborg's version, this Anglicized Prophet is an example of what Srinivas Aravamudan calls the tropological revision of imperial and racial ideologies: rather than assimilating Mahomet's head to an abstract Anglo or Caucasian-European model (an imperialist gesture), the viewer is compelled to imagine the Islamizing of a "white" English individual—a disruption of the national imaginary that defines a people or race through their shared homogenous features rather than heterogeneous ones.⁸ As Makdisi has argued when noting the apparent lack of harems, genies, sultans, and eunuchs in Blake's works, the poet-artist refuses to orientalize Islam (*Impossible* 209–10, 252–57). What is notably missing from his sketch is the turban, mustache and beard, Ottoman-style clothing, dark skin color, and other markers of racial difference that stereotypically distinguish the eastern other from the western self.

In short, Blake's Mahomet erases the self/other distinction implicit in Swedenborg's "dusky" polygynist Prophet. In his annotations to Swedenborg's *Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, Blake raises skeptical concerns about a parallel world in which the "spiritual Sun" equated with life exists apart from the "natural Sun" equated with death. He criticizes Swedenborg's inconsistent assertion that men's natural ideas are exempt from spiritual ideas by virtue of their fallen materiality and yet are open to the divine influx "while in the Body." Blake reasons: "How absurd then would it be to say that no man on earth has a spiritual idea" (*E* 606–7). Likewise, the spiritual Anglicized Prophet cannot exist apart from his material exoticized counterpart, because, for Blake, "the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius" (*E* 1; *All Religions are One*). To put it simply, the idea that a materially dead and salvation-deprived Prophet could somehow reveal God's oneness on earth is, by definition, self-contradictory and absurd.

Nevertheless, Blake's rejection of a dual material/spiritual universe does not imply that the poet-artist has cast aside his strong aversion to domineering prophets, whether biblical, Qur'anic, or contemporary (including Swe-

denborg). As evident in *The Song of Los*, prophets, sages, and religious leaders cannot escape Urizen's repressive legalistic abstractions and institutions. Most notably, the Blake-Mahomet image is included among the Visionary Heads of Edward I, King John, David, and other historical and fictional figures; the first two names are emblematic of long-standing debates in England about Anglo-Saxon liberty and the Norman Conquest, republican virtue versus despotic corruption. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plates 12-13, Blake's negative description of poet-king David's priestly autocratic empire can also apply to the Prophet Muhammad: Prophet Ezekiel tells Blake that the Israelite belief in the "Poetic Genius" eventually led to "our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved. to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius, it was this. that our great poet King David desired so fervently & invokes so pathetically, saying by this he conquers enemies & governs kingdoms" (E 39). Blake does not subscribe to Swedenborg's racial description of a "dusky" Muhammad, and yet the inclusion of his Visionary Head with King David's suggests that Islam's poet-prophet, originally spiritual and well-intentioned, reinstated David's priestly rule and, like the Israelites, used the Poetic Genius as a justification for military aggression against nonbelievers.

Even though Blake posits the dual existence of a spiritual and priestly Muhammad, he nonetheless exalts the Prophet's place in Abrahamic history. Unlike Swedenborg's vision, Blake's description of "A Vision of The Last Judgment" (1810) includes Muhammad in the ecumenical scheme of Christian salvation rather than excludes him because of his racial difference. Perhaps referring to "The Last Judgment" (1805) design for Robert Blair's *The Grave*, among other possible sources, Blake's description of this painting for the unprinted *Descriptive Catalogue* (1810) treats Abraham's eldest son Ishmael as a typological sign for Islam: "[Beneath] <Ishmael is Mahomet>" (E 556). Based on the number of figures in the design and the biblical story, David Erdman's bracketed note is meant to suggest that Mahomet follows Ishmael in the Abrahamic genealogy. Blake envisions Islam as part of the original monotheistic family, reflecting the Judeo-Christian-Islamic genealogy of Arabs as descendants of Ishmael as well as the Muslim belief that Qur'anic revelation stems from the same roots as the Torah, the psalms, and the Gospel.

According to David Erdman's (following Geoffrey Keynes) editorial reconstruction of Blake's design, Abraham appears beneath Abel kneeling on a "bloody Cloud" alongside "Sarah & Isaac [&] also Hagar & Ishmael." The "bloody Cloud" represents the perpetual betrayal of "those Churches before the flood that they were filld with blood & fire & vapour of smoke

even till Abrahams time the vapour & heat was not Extinguishd" (*E* 556). The corrupt state religions of prediluvian times continued in the faiths of Ishmael and Isaac, except for one crucial difference: Mahomet appears beneath Ishmael whereas Moses appears "beneath the falling figure of Cain" rather than Isaac. Associated with Cain, Moses symbolizes sin, murder, and betrayal, while Mahomet implicitly assumes Abel's company. Before the "<Judgment Seat> in humiliation Abel [is] surrounded by Innocents & Cain <with the flint in his hand with which he slew his brother> falling with the head downward," mirroring the downcast position of Satan "falling headlong wound round by the tail of the serpent" as well as "Moses casting his tables of stone into the Deeps" (*E* 556). Most significantly, Moses appears on the "Left hand" of Christ: "The Just arise on his right & the wicked on his Left hand" (*E* 557, 556). Interpreted esoterically as "States Signified by those Names," Blake traces Mahomet to the sinless branch of Ishmael-Abel whereas Moses—prefiguring Christ's redemption in orthodox Christianity—finds his lineage in the sinful branch of the biblical family tree (*E* 556). The inclusion of Islam in Blake's vision of salvation inverts Swedenborg's racial-spiritual order: Mahomet is closer to the divine center in heaven than Moses, thereby subordinating Judaism and Christianity to Islam.

Just as Ishmael and Hagar the exiled concubine are exalted in Blake's vision (and in the Qur'an), Mahomet the polygynist is not barred from Christian salvation. Blake posits two Muhammads, one spiritual and one priestly, but (contra Swedenborg) does not cast this distinction in racial terms. Blake never implies that Muslims as a whole are inferior owing to their adulterous and polygynous dispositions. In this sense, his vision goes further than Swedenborg's in aiming to restore the original unity of humanity irrespective of racial differences: "[the] various States I have seen in my Imagination when distant they appear as One Man but as you approach they appear Multitudes of Nations" (*E* 556–57; *A Vision of the Last Judgment* 76). Expressing unity in diversity, biblical names are "States" that (as noted in his 1809 *Descriptive Catalogue*) designate "the ancient republics, monarchies, and patriarchates of Asia," where "the Sacred Scriptures of the Cherubim" originated (*E* 531). Consistent with my reading of *The Song of Los* and the Mahomet sketch, Blake's description of the Last Judgment design casts Islam as the restored Abrahamic faith of Asia despite—or actually because of—the Muslim sanctification of polygyny.

Holy Entrails and Schismatic Bodies

Blake's sympathetic representation of Mahomet does not share Swedenborg's reservations about Islamic polygyny, a negative orientalist stereotype

commonly used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British writers to distinguish civilized Christians from barbaric Muslims. Of course, not every Muslim is a polygynist; the Qur'an permits men to marry up to four wives, but never commands them to do so (Q 4.3). Although Muhammad's own polygynous marriages exceeded this limit, it was commonly practiced by Jews and some Christians, from Abraham, David, and Solomon up to and beyond the Reformation.⁹ In Blake's description of the Last Judgment, this practice is implicitly endorsed in the redeemed Ishmael, the son of a concubine mother and a polygynous father. For the most part however, my esoterically informed readings have shown that polygyny is mysteriously absent in Blake's representations of Islam. One reason for this absence might be due to his radical acceptance of concubinage as conditionally permitted in Swedenborg's doctrine and later suppressed by orthodox Swedenborgians. Indeed, the sexual theosophy proposed in *De amore conjugiali* (1768) became controversial among a faction of the London New Jerusalem Church opposed to concubinage in conjugal love, an unresolved issue that was temporarily laid to rest in the compromised 1789 circular letter (signed by the Blakes). This doctrinal dispute may have prompted Blake to adopt an antinomian view on polygynous marriages.¹⁰ I argue that his watercolor illustration to Canto 28 of Dante's *Inferno* (1824–1827), when read esoterically, negates the Italian poet's portrayal of a hell-bound schismatic Muhammad and his cousin and son-in-law Ali. Their potential salvation implies, once again, that Islamic polygyny does not preclude access to universal Christian redemption.

On a literal level, Blake's "The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mahomet" (figure 3) echoes Dante's unsparing condemnation of Muhammad and Ali for their schismatic separation from Christianity and the sectarian split between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. The latter accept Ali as the rightful heir of the true Caliphate, the first Imam, usurped by the Sunni-backed Caliphs. In Dante's poem these two Islamic figures are heretics in the ninth level of hell, where a fiend continuously splits their bodies as they heal. This systematic punishment symbolizes divine vengeance for their schismatic crimes. Most critics have read the Dante pictures as disengaged or acquiescent. Representing this approach, David Fuller argues that Blake differs from Dante in that Muhammad is included in "an eclectic Christian tradition," yet the artist remains uncritical of Dante's rigid moral order: "in his illustration of the schismatics Blake again simply depicts what Dante describes" (358). Read in this manner, the Dante image stands in contrast to Blake's positive portrayal of the beardless young Mahomet. Indeed, the schismatic Mahomet appears as an older version of the Prophet after he received the Qur'anic revelation. He is a corrupted figure of state religion

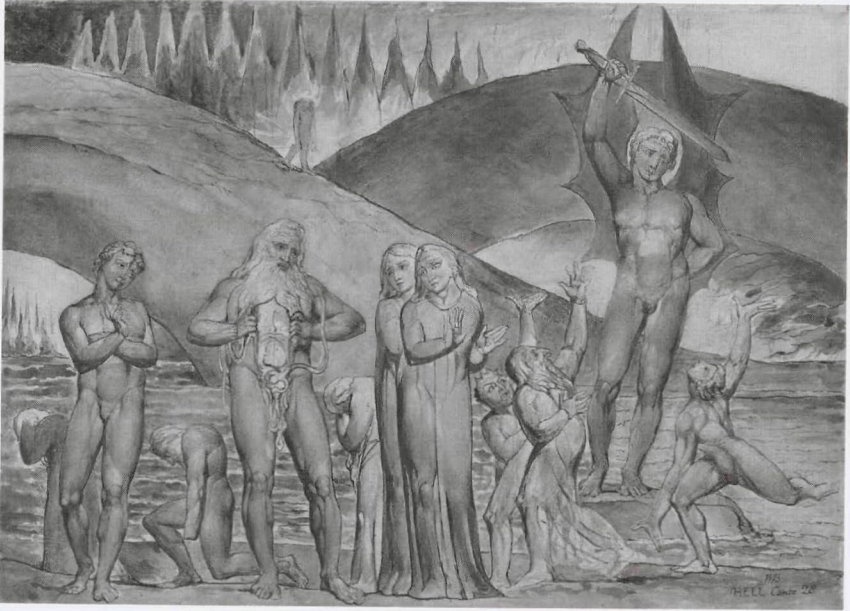


Figure 3. William Blake, Illustration to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1824-7) *Hell*, Canto 28: *The Schismatics and Sowers of Discord: Mahomet*. Mahomet, Pen and watercolour over pencil, 37.3 X 52.7 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Felton Bequest, 1920.

who, as Albert S. Roe observes, “has the bearded countenance of Urizen... display[ing] his wound as though demanding vengeance” (40). However, Morton Paley has shown that Blake’s *Inferno* illustrations are not always subservient to Dante’s ideas, nor should they be read as formulaic applications of Blakean concepts. Rather, “the hermeneutics of the Dante series is... a contested subject, and... no single approach will do for interpreting all the Dante pictures” (*Traveller* 116). In these pictures, hermeneutical complexity enables critical alternative interpretations of Dante’s vision. As in Swedenborg’s correspondence theory, this complexity invites the receptive initiate to engage in an esoteric figurative reading that focuses on the redemptive qualities of hell and its condemned inhabitants.

Angus Whitehead proposes such a reading based on a detailed comparison of Blake’s illustration with the first section of Canto 28 in the *Inferno*. Paying attention to Dante’s and Virgil’s ground-level proximity to Muhammad and Ali, as well as to the merciful restraint exercised by the humanized sword-waving fiend, Whitehead aptly concludes that “the angel-demon, and Muhammad and Ali, punisher and punished, are represented by Blake as nobly suffering figures enslaved by Dante’s system of cruel vengeance”

(41–42). As Paley and Roe first observed, the humanlike muscular demon recalls his past angelic identity, marking the triumph of divine forgiveness over vengeance (Roe 113; Paley, *The Traveller* 137). By comparison, Ali is making a pious gesture. Whitehead writes, “Blake is likely to have known of Ali’s piety and his revered position, especially in Shia Islam, as fourth caliph, first imam, martyr and a repository of esoteric knowledge” (40). Whitehead fails to note that the image of a cleft-headed Ali is a prophetic sign of his martyred death wound to the skull in Muslim legend (a physical detail mentioned in Dante’s description of him) (Palacios 261). Dante modeled *The Divine Comedy* on mystical Muslim accounts of the Prophet’s ascension from Jerusalem to heaven (the *mir’aj*) after his initial descent into hell. Muhammad’s and Ali’s splitting is rooted in Islamic legends that describe how sinners suffered the same fate (103–4). In Blake’s mythos, images of clovenness and splitting usually signal postlapsarian division and sin, but Ali’s pious gesture suggests otherwise. In Shi’ite Gnostic theosophy, Ali’s cleft head has a figurative esoteric significance: the living leadership of the Imam, since Ali, needs to supplement continuously Muhammad’s final revelation. Like Christ, the Imam is a mediator between humanity and the divine (Brown, *Challenge* 109, 113). Insofar as Ali the Imam assumes Christ’s messianic status, Blake’s illustration subsumes Dante’s Christian vision in the Islamic (Shi’ite) prophetic tradition from which it originated. As Ross Woodman has observed, mystical accounts of Shi’ite Christology are symbolically encoded in Blake’s prophecies, which invoke the return of the Hidden Imam, the messianic figure who will unveil the spiritual nature concealed in matter and thus unseal the final prophecy (23–26, 138–72).

Indeed, Ali’s pious gesture is directed toward the Prophet’s self-exhibited wound, which is symbolic of inward vision. Mirrored by the close-up gaze of the two poets, Virgil and Dante, and contrasted to the fiend’s side-cast downward eyes, Ali’s spiritual gaze renders Muhammad’s split torso the focal point for an esoteric interpretation. In *William Blake and the Body*, Tristanne J. Connolly argues that the intestinal imagery prevalent in Blake’s anatomical art symbolizes a perceptual penetration of the body, revealing the essential connection between internal and external, spiritual and corporeal (48–49). Influenced by the nineteenth-century study of anatomy, Blake’s art frees the porous body from clothing or skin to reveal its concealed spirituality. The intestinally exposed body is a microcosm of the universe. Blake frequently references the divided and porous body as symbolic not only of the fall but also the future reunification of the pre-fallen spiritual body. In *The Four Zoas*, Blake writes “The fallen Man but first to Give his vegetated body / To be cut off & separated that the Spiritual body may be Reveald” (*E* 378; 104.37–38). The separated body anticipates the physical reintegration of

the eternal man: "So Man looks out in tree & herb & fish & bird & beast / Collecting up the scattered portions of his immortal body" (*E* 385; 110.6-7). As Swedenborg notes, "the Grand Man...is only an organism...to which correspond the organic, or membranous things of the body, which are actuated by the Life of the Lord, thus think and act from the Lord" (*Diary* 3.52). For Blake, this correspondence is actuated not only in and through the wounded crucified Christ. As fallen bodies in the perpetual process of splitting/healing, Muhammad's divided torso and Ali's cleft head prophesy the potential reunification of the grand eternal man.

According to Connolly, Blake's graphic bodies entail two interpretations: "they can enable intimate connection through visual penetration and sympathetic uniting, yet they can also indicate the imprisonment of the human in the restriction and isolation of the body" (65). In Christian theosophy, these two interpretations parallel respectively the distinction between esoteric and exoteric knowledge. This distinction is demonstrated in William Law's publication of Jacob Böhme's mystical writings, a work that Blake—an admirer of this "divinely inspired" author—praised for its "very beautiful" accompanying figures (Bentley, *Records* 423). In the Third Table illustration (engraved by Dionysius A. Freher), the naked human exists in the material world of the zodiac circle, surrounded by the city and nature, but contains a microcosm of the universe within when the two pop-out flaps are opened. Revealed esoterically, the heavenly power of the starry brain and heart exists in the same legs and feet exposed to the beasts and flames of hell (figures 4 and 5). In this unified Edenic body, "*The Entrails or Guts* signify the Operation of the Stars" in a self-generated eternity, "for their consuming all that which is proceeded from their Power, for whatsoever *themselves* have made, that they consume again" (Böhme 29). Likewise, Blake's visionary penetration of the forever regenerating split Mahomet reveals a microcosmic body in which hell is the physical manifestation of the eternal man, or as he writes: "hell is the outward or external of heaven. & is of the body of the lord. for nothing is destroyd" (*E* 602; "Annotations to Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*"). The image of the celestial body is also central to Muslim mystical accounts in which two angels opened the child Muhammad's chest and washed his heart clean from a satanic impurity. To quote Connolly again, the Prophet's dangling entrails suggest that, for Blake, "the fallen body...has the potential to be, to some degree, transparent, and escape, to some extent, its limitations" (72). In short, esoteric (Shi'ite) Islam promises to restore the conjugal union between body and soul before the Fall.

By contrast, Swedenborg does not ascribe this redemptive quality to Muhammad and Ali (who is absent from his visions) due to the anti-spiritual

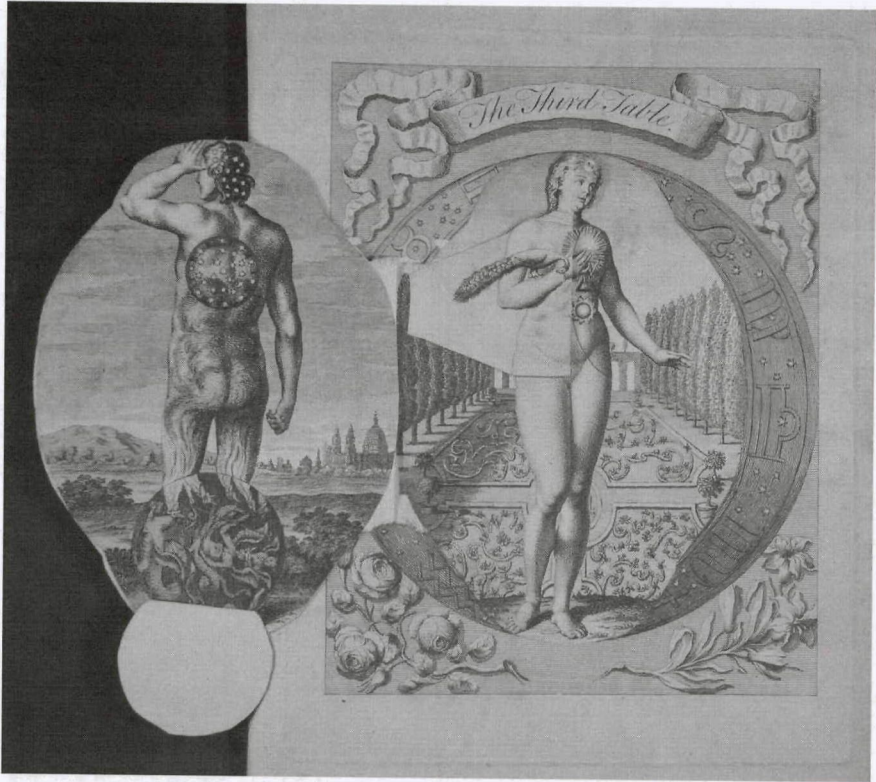


Figure 5. Third Table, with opened flaps.

stigma of Islamic polygyny. Unlike Dante's vision of just punishments equal to sinful crimes, Swedenborg rejects the orthodox idea that humanity's deeds are weighed after death. Instead, sinners of all religions willingly move to hell to satisfy their forbidden desires, or what he calls their "governing love" (*Treatise* 54, 22). In his writings on conjugal love, Swedenborg notes that polygyny does not draw Muslims to hell. Because this practice is sanctioned by the "Israelitish nation," whose religious principles the Mahometans have preserved, it cannot be considered inherently sinful even as it deprives them of spiritual knowledge of the Lord (*Delights* 328–331). Their God-deprived natural state exempts them from the monogamous union enjoined on all Christians, so polygyny is "absolutely condemned" as lascivious among the Christian churches but not among Muslims (321). Hence, "[i]nasmuch as polygamy cannot convict them [Muslims] of sin, therefore after death they have their heaven...and therein have joys according to the life" (336).

They enter their own heaven, separate from Christians, and do so in one of two levels: a higher heaven reserved for monogamous Muslims, "they who renounce concubines and live with one wife," and a lower heaven for polygynous Muslims (333). In either case, they are barred from achieving the union with God available only to those top-ranking heaven-bound Christians who practice monogamy. Even though Swedenborg makes special exceptions for Muslims and refuses to condemn polygyny categorically, he does not exalt Islam's message of universal redemption. His hierarchal Christocentric order precludes this possibility. In other words, he Christianizes the Islamic prophetic tradition in a way that counters Blake's ecumenical approach to salvation. As Blake writes in *Milton*, "the value of the Saviours blood" is denied in a Swedenborgian orthodoxy that hierarchically designates "Heaven as a Punisher & Hell as One under Punishment"—the former for good monogamous Christians, the latter for evil non-Christians (*E* 118; 22. 52, 54). For Blake but not Swedenborg, Christ's redemption offers salvation for all religions equally, sinners and saints alike, despite differences in belief and practice.

Swedenborg's desacralization of Muslim polygyny elides larger unresolved questions about his partial sanctification of concubinage, a doctrinal controversy fought among London Swedenborgians during a time when the Blakes were deeply involved in church affairs. In *The Delights of Wisdom Concerning Conjugal [sic] Love* (first translated in 1794 by the conservative Swedenborgian John Clowes), concubinage for married men is permissible within legitimate and legally adjudicated situations (disease, madness, adultery, difference of faith) in which divorce is not an option, but with the condition that the husband cease to have intercourse with his first wife even as she continues to live in the same household with him and his second wife. For Swedenborg, this legitimate form of concubinage is not polygynous, which he defines as the taking of a second wife while cohabiting sexually with the first one. The latter is anti-Christian because it corrupts the conjugal union—prefigured in the monogamous sexual act—between the Lord as husband and the Church as wife (428–40). Swedenborg warns: "if a christian should adjoin wife to wife, he would rend asunder in himself that spiritual marriage, consequently would profane the origin of his marriage, and would thereby commit spiritual adultery" (328). Legitimate concubinage does not endanger this "spiritual marriage," because the husband remains faithful to only one wife at a time. It should not therefore be confused with illegitimate concubinage or "Israelitish" and Islamic polygyny (328–31). He further notes,

That that conjugal principle, by polygamical scortation, is destroyed with the christian who is principled in such scortation, is manifest from this consideration, that he cannot, like a mahometan polygamist, love a concubine and a wife equally, but that so far as he loves a concubine, or is warm towards her, so far as he doth not love a wife, but is so far cold towards her. (432)

This passage is open to two subversive interpretations: first, that polygyny could be legitimate if a husband were able to love his wife and a concubine equally, in which case he could preserve the undivided *amor sexus* necessary for conjugal union with the Lord. Second, Muslim polygynists are spiritually superior in that they alone exhibit the capacity to follow the Qur'anic injunction allowing up to four wives with the condition that they be treated fairly and equally (see Glassé 477). In introducing this positive definition of Islamic polygyny, Swedenborg potentially undermines the fine theological distinction between legitimate and illegitimate concubinage.

The subversive blurring of this distinction contributed toward an emerging rift in the London New Jerusalem Church a month after the Blakes' attendance of the Eastcheap conference. Orthodox Swedenborgians were opposed to the translation and printing of *De amore conjugali*, which was banned and confiscated in Sweden following Swedenborg's heresy trial between 1769 and 1770. Especially after the French Revolution, Swedenborgians who wished to maintain an allegiance to the Anglican Church were wary of the immoral and revolutionary implications of concubinage as a sanctified form of Islamic or Israelite polygyny (Rix, *William Blake* 100–2). Indeed, the radical Swedenborgian Augustus Nordenskjöld sought to abolish slavery and allow concubinage under a mixed-race colony in Sierra Leone, as proposed in his *Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa* (1789). In his republican utopia, married couples are to exercise frequent and uninhibited intercourse, in which "Concubinage...under certain regulations never ought to be forbidden in a free state" (31). Nordenskjöld's attempt to institutionalize Swedenborg's ideas on concubinage resulted in his and other likeminded Swedenborgians' expulsion from the London congregation. According to Morton Paley, this doctrinal dispute may partly explain why Blake later disassociated himself from Swedenborgianism. His views on uninhibited sexuality are affiliated with, and even surpass, the revolutionary ideas espoused by these expelled Swedenborgians ("New Heaven" 72). Marsha Keith Schuchard further speculates that the poet-artist may have justified polygyny on Abrahamic and Old Testament precedent, much to the dismay of his unwilling participant Catherine Blake (238–39). Assuming that this conjecture is correct—as recorded in Henry Crabb Robinson's diary and suppressed by subsequent biographers—Blake may have understood Islamic polygyny as a virtuous Abrahamic practice preferable to

monogamous Christian unions. As he told a bewildered Robinson, "What are called the Vices in the natural world, are the highest sublimities in the spiritual world" (Bentley, *Blake Records* 700).

Inferred from his affiliation with radical Swedenborgians who promoted uninhibited (extra-marital) sexuality, the probable hypothesis that Blake embraced polygyny in his life and works helps explain why the "loose" biblical corpus, the Qur'an, is a prototype for his antinomian prophecies. In his Dante illustration and Mahomet self-sketch, the Prophet's porous book/body activates the conjugal spirituality unavailable to monogamous Christians. After the controversy plaguing the New Jerusalem Church, the topic of polygyny remained cautiously unarticulated yet implicit in Blake's positive representations of Islam. Of course, I am not arguing that the poet-artist is free from the orientalist stereotypes of his time. Particularly in *The Song of Los*, Islam is equated with Urizen's corrupt state religion, but only from a limited exoteric perspective: the Qur'an represses sexuality due to the same historical pattern evident in "all Bibles or sacred codes" that dub bodily energy sinful (*E* 34; *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 4). From an esoteric-antinomian perspective, the Qur'an's "loose" corpus reintegrates body and soul, beyond the moral law, even if this conjugal union entails polygynous love. To "loosen" the Bible is therefore to penetrate the body spiritually, sexually, and textually.

Blake's scattered representations of Mahomet and the Qur'an are not tangential to his egalitarian vision, in which "Every honest man is a Prophet" (*E* 617; "Annotations to *An Apology*" 14). By showing how Blake drew on and deviated from Swedenborg's esoteric theosophy, this essay has historicized Norman O. Brown's thesis that the poet-artist indirectly appropriated, and sought inspiration from, an Islamic-Gnostic (primarily Shi'ite) approach to successive revelation. I hope to have shown how representations of Islam helped define Blake's heterodox conceptions of embodied prophecy and religious enthusiasm. Having redressed this understudied topic, I also recognize that Blake's esoteric vision is not influenced exclusively by Swedenborgianism. More research on his debt to Moravian ecumenical theology is necessary to further substantiate the speculative argument presented in this essay.¹¹ Eighteenth-century intellectual, theological, and historical connections provide a productive starting point—if not the only interpretative framework currently available—for making sense of Blake's scant but positive references to Islam.

Blake's place in a living prophetic tradition also acquires meaning in relation to the future, our twenty-first century. After all, his polysemic prophecies lend themselves to ongoing events in the Middle East and North Africa, where despotic "Kings of Asia" are now threatened by democratic revolu-

tions: "the thick-flamed, thought-creating fires of Orc" (*E* 68; *SL* 6.1, 6). In the section on "Asia," the Last Judgment occurs in Muslim Jerusalem: not coincidentally, the biblical-Qur'anic site of the soul's bodily resurrection, in which "The Grave shrieks with delight" and "Her bosom swells with wild desire" (*E* 69; 7.35, 37). Insofar as Blake speaks again through the Qur'an (as expressed in this essay's epigraph), he does so in the prophetic voices of those who today fight for theological-political reform, East and West.

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NOTES

1. I would like to acknowledge my two readers, Robert Rix and Edward Larrissy, for providing insightful and constructive feedback that helped me revise this essay. I also thank my Vanderbilt colleague Jonathan Lamb for reading and commenting on an earlier draft. Research for this essay at the Huntington and Clark Memorial Libraries was generously supported by a one-year Vanderbilt Scholar Fellowship and a Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Blake's writings refer to David V. Erdman's edition; the abbreviated "E" refers to page numbers in that edition, followed by an abbreviation of the work's title and plate/page and line number.

3. For a more thorough discussion on Enlightenment freethinkers who revised theories of "imposture" by recasting Mahomet in a positive Greco-Roman republican mold—as an "Arabian legislator"—see Champion 333–56. Also see Garcia.

4. A broad survey of Blake's indebtedness to Swedenborgianism is provided in Bellin and Ruhl and Paley. A copy of the 1789 circular letter is included in Bellin and Ruhl, 121–31.

5. Outside the Wahhabi tradition, *tawhid* is generally understood by Muslims to be all-inclusive in the sense that nothing lies beyond God. From a Sufi perspective, the realization of this all-inclusiveness requires mystical union with God. See Glassé 454.

6. Many Qur'anic passages condemn poets and poetry as demonic, mainly in response to unbelievers who cast the Prophet's Qur'anic verses as the false work of a poet, understood at the time to be a possessed soothsayer and magician (see Q 21.5, 37.36, 52.29–31, 69.41). Furthermore, the Qur'an attacks poetry as an inappropriate vehicle for transmitting the Prophet's revelation (Q 36.69–70). These condemnations did not prevent Muslims from promoting poets or from reading such Qur'anic verses as permitting certain forms of elevated poetry. See Jones.

7. On "Turning Turk" as an anxious marker of national identity and religious difference, see Colley.

8. On Blake's use of visual semiotics to invert racial and colonial typologies, see Aravamudan, 6–9.

9. On Christians who argued that the Old Testament and church patriarchs were polygamists and that monogamy is a corrupt Catholic doctrine, see Cairncross.

10. On the London controversy regarding *De amore conjugiali*, see Rix, *Cultures* 98–104. Elsewhere Rix speculates that Blake may have aligned himself with an antinomian faction of the London New Jerusalem Church shortly after the Eastcheap conference. See Rix, “Infernal Love and Faith,” particularly 114–15.

11. On Blake’s affiliation with the Moravian chapel at Fetter Lane (which Swedenborg frequently attended in the 1740s) via his mother Catherine Blake and her first husband Thomas Armitage, see Davies, “Jonathan Spilsbury,” “Lost Moravian History,” and “Recovering the Lost Moravian History.” Ankarsjö argues that even though Blake subscribes to Swedenborgian ideas and beliefs “we can safely call him Moravian” (139).

According to Arthur J. Freeman, Moravian theology promotes an ecumenical approach to Christ’s salvation within any sect or denomination, even outside Christianity (247–49). In this sense, the Gospel represents a universal religion accessible through other churches and religious traditions that express the essential oneness of God. The Moravian missions’ task is to accommodate the beliefs and practices of potential converts in order “to define the Savior for many who already knew of or experienced the Creator” (303). For Moravian writings on Muslims in the Near East, as well as on the Moravian ecumenical approach to religious conversion, see Hutton, 160–64.

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