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The Christological Writings of Maurice Creasey: A Response

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I first encountered the Christological writings of Maurice Creasey while working through the controversial literature relating to the Christology of early Friends. I was searching for direction that would point me toward a more conciliatory spirit. Unfortunately obstacles to dialogue persisted through the ages not only between Friends and outside religious groups but within the Society of Friends. Still, Maurice Creasey is a good place to start. A critical interpretation of Creasey’s approach to the Christology of early Friends must necessarily consider historical consistency and Creasey’s demythologizing of the christological language of early Friends.

One of the most useful tools for understanding early Friends (Creasey liked the term ‘early Friends’) was provided by one of their more sympathetic contemporaries – the Cambridge Platonist Henry More. He was of the view that there were two groups of Quakers, one rustic and mechanic (which was the majority) and one refined and educated (which was a tiny minority). The general tone of More’s intuitions about the dividing line within 17th century Quakerism remains useful until ongoing more detailed local studies are collated, enabling us to read nuanced differences more accurately.¹ There is, however, a sufficiently growing body of evidence to reach a tentative conclusion that 17th century Quakerism was not a theologically homogenous movement.

There is much in More’s second group of early Friends including William Penn, Robert Barclay, Isaac Penington, and George Keith that may be found among the first group of early Friends such as the reaction against an outward, formalistic and ritualistic religion. The second group separates from the first group by asserting that Christ should be kept distinct from creatures even while He is in all creatures. While Creasey was very astute in his overall reading of the Christology of early Friends he tended to treat the topic as homogenous and this had a distorting effect on his conclusions.

In his 1956 doctoral dissertation Creasey set up Isaac Penington as the one in whom Quakerism “finds its most fruitful expression”.²

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Penington was trying to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge of how Christ was apprehended. Outward rational knowledge of Christ was “according to the flesh” while the inward apprehension of Christ was “according to the Spirit”.\(^1\) There is no sense in which the glorified substance of Christ actually inhabited the believer. Christ was only in the believer spiritually. Even George Fox, who would belong to More’s first group of early Friends, always saw the problem of the separation of God and man as “moral and spiritual, rather than metaphysical one: he is not concerned with defining the precise relationship between two abstract ‘natures’, but only with the problem of how the separation … may be overcome”\(^4\). Fox’s thought was “unsystematic” and “moves all the time in personal and ethical terms and, seemingly, with little concern with the ontological problem concerned.”\(^5\) Creasey does not deny that Fox failed to make the distinction between Christ and saint, sanctifier and sanctified and it has been my contention that ‘non-distinction’ and the efforts to put that experience into words has been problematic for Friends throughout the ages.

Compared with the first group of early Friends the second group was very careful to distinguish between the pre-existent Christ and the believer’s soul. They were also careful to maintain a distinction between “historic faith” which was a “notion of what was done in another generation” and “living Faith” a distinction Keith and Barclay collectively affirmed in a 1676 statement.\(^6\) Creasey was of the view that early Friends believed the mode of Christ’s presence among men after the historic incarnation was one of “spiritual presence”.\(^7\) Over time Quakers either dropped or toned down the language and ideas which had been characteristic of early Friends, especially the “mystical and universal aspects and implications of Quaker experience.”\(^8\) A curious statement from Creasey since it was precisely the mystical and universal aspect of the inner light that came to define one important group of later Friends and Creasey knew this. The confusion underscores the dangers of treating the Christology of early Friends as homogenous. The early language that was dropped, toned down or otherwise altered was not the mystical language of the inner light but the language of non-distinction with its blasphemous implications. Creasey was correct to the extent that there was among Friends such as Barclay and Penn a tendency toward “a more or less fully articulated theological system” that accommodated “Protestant orthodoxy”.\(^9\) Barclay, Keith, Penington, and Penn retained the supremacy of the inward over the outward. However, they used a number of different
approaches to emphasize the separation of Christ and the saint in a way that Fox and the first group of Quakers never did. In the words of Alexander Gordon whom Creasey cites, “Penn and Barclay were the two men on whom, in their respective countries, the responsibility chiefly lay of deciphering the meaning and recommending the life of the Quaker movement, that it might benefit those to whom Fox was a mystery and Quakerism a madness.” Creasey himself belonged in a long and continuing process of re-interpretation that has variously been defined by Quaker scholars as an effort to “decipher” meanings or “give safer expression to their message.”

David Johns’ collection of Creasey’s Christological writings offers three keys to understanding what Creasey is saying about the Christology of early Friends, all rooted in his 1956 dissertation. The first is that he reorients the view of the inner light as reason or conscience back to its proper focus which is Christ. Second, the terms ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ are used to help unite what has otherwise been the contentious issue of the place of the historic Christ and the Christ of personal experience in Quaker thought and life. Early Friends were redressing what they thought was a dry, rigid, lifeless, intellectualized faith with a fresh, new inward experience of Christ. Third, he wants to ‘de-mythologize’ early Friends language about the inner light of Christ.

First, Creasey shifts the doctrine of the inner light from an anthropological back to a Christological focus. This was a corrective to modern Quaker renderings of the inner light. Early Friends held to a Christology that placed them in the “profoudest possible relationship to God”. Throughout the ages this relationship had existed in different modes – “Christ’s pre-incarnate, incarnate, or risen and glorified states.” Creasey dismissed the claim that it is Christ who is substantially present even though he recognizes the confusion created by the language of early Friends. What he does not adequately investigate are the implications of the radical language of the first group of early Friends. He sees the early Quaker emphasis on the inner Light as Christ while steering clear of the radical soteriological implications of such a view, implications underscored by orthodox contemporaries of early Friends.

To help him explain how Christ and saint were united Creasey turned to Albert Schweitzer’s “Christ-mysticism” which he discussed at some length in his dissertation. Schweitzer’s “Christ-mysticism” was a “direct becoming one with the infinite creative will of God”.

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This concept includes what Creasey calls the ‘extensive’ and the ‘intensive’ “aspects of the early Quaker teaching concerning Christ” and this takes us to the second key to understanding the Christology of early Friends. The ‘extensive’ “looks upon the whole drama of creation and history ... and looks and works for the day when the Kingdom of this world shall become the Kingdom of God and of his Christ.” The ‘intensive’ “seeks to know the reality of Christ’s presence and redemptive power in the deepest recesses of personal life and relationships.” Creasey believes early Friends succeeded “in holding together both emphases within a single living experience.” Later Quakerism “tended to follow one or other of two divergent directions.” The first we may identify with Rufus Jones’ effort to identify Quakerism with continental mystical and spiritualist traditions. This tendency has defined the Quietist element within Quakerism – an approach that has often been associated with “some lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of the biblical and Christian revelation.” The other “tendency has been to abandon the attempt to explore, interpret, and express that distinctive conception of Christ which the first Quaker leaders proclaimed by their doctrine of the Inward Light of Christ, and to adopt the language of Protestant evangelical orthodoxy.” Creasey adds that the origin of this “bifurcation” in Quaker history ... is to be sought ... in the tensions which resulted from the attempt to express a profound insight into the meaning of divine revelation in Jesus Christ in the language of ‘inner light,’ in terms that were not really adequate to give expression to it. Adequate terms were not, indeed, available in the seventeenth century – nor are they yet.” He concludes “The original Quaker conception of Christ ... was able to hold together both the concrete and the universal, the historical and the mystical emphases. Unhappily, this vision has to a large extent faded from among us, and the component elements of that comprehensive conception have fallen apart.” Early Friends were able to hold together the universal, historical and mystical emphases. Later Friends were unable to do this and hence the bifurcation between those who emphasize the inward light of Christ and those who tend toward Protestant evangelical orthodoxy. Creasey notes that the greatest challenge facing contemporary Friends comes with the terms ‘historic’ and ‘inward’ Christ. These problematic terms were used by Edward Grubb. Creasey says that Grubb, by the very use of these terms, creates a dualism that is “the cause of most of our trouble.” Grubb would want to harmonize the historic and inward. Creasey, on the contrary, says
that if we persist in formulating the problem in these terms, we effectually prevent ourselves from finding a solution, for the problem is an unreal one, residing in the terms not in the realities of the situation. It is not at all a question of “holding together” or “re-uniting” the outward and the spiritual, the historic and the inward, as if these were inert and static components which have to be assembled like parts of a machine ... Rather it is a question of rightly discerning in “the historic” and in “the outward” the dimensions or perspectives of the inward, the spiritual and the eternal.25

Creasey critiques Grubb for continuing to state the problem of the ‘inward’ and the ‘outward’ in 17th century terms that have little meaning to modern Quakers. “Christ has always been present in the souls of men.” What does that mean to someone today? How is the inward Christ present in a way that includes that ‘outward form’26 and this takes us the third key to understanding the Christology of early Friends.

Even as modern NT scholarship has ‘de-mythologized’ the language of Scripture Friends must be prepared to recognize that a good deal of our own cherished and traditional language calls no less urgently for de-mythologization. To de-mythologize our language does not, of course, mean that we no longer use it. It means, rather, that we continue to use it, but use it now with a clearer understanding of what we mean by it ... What, in other words, ought we to mean when we affirm that “every man is enlightened by the divine light of Christ,” or speak of “the Christ within”?27

Creasey explores ways of thinking and speaking about Jesus Christ today. It must meet Friends’ needs today. He returns to the “intensive” and “extensive” aspects of understanding Jesus Christ wherein the “extensive” is “a valid inference from our experience”28 – the “intensive”. Creasey wants to make the early Quaker way of understanding Christ relevant to today “without employing the unclear and dubious distinction between the “Christ of history” and the “Christ of faith and experience.” Nor is it necessary to lose ourselves in the speculative labyrinth concerning a pre-existent “Person who has always been present in the souls of men”. Creasey is trying to arrive at an “understanding of Jesus Christ” that makes sense to Quakers today “in a way that our traditional language about ‘inner light’ does not”.29
In concluding we must ask whether Creasey’s effort to de-mythologize and modernize loses sight of what early Friends were trying to say about Christ. How far can we take the effort of demythologizing and modernizing before Quaker stops being Quaker?

ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to Rosalind Johnson of the University of Winchester who is working on Protestant dissent in Hampshire who directed me to a number of local studies that included Ph.D/D.Phil theses and published monographs on dissent in Derbyshire, Gloucester, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Warwickshire, Yorkshire, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Essex, London, and Norfolk.
2. Maurice A. Creasey, Early Quaker Christology with Special Reference to the Teaching and Significance of Isaac Penington, 1616-1679, D.Phil. Thesis (University of Leeds, 1956)
3. Ibid., 265.
4. Ibid., 90.
5. Ibid., 90.
7. Creasey, Early Quaker Christology, 110.
8. Ibid., 195.
9. Ibid., 195.
13. Ibid., 100.
15. Collected Essays, 106
16. Ibid., 107.
17. Ibid., 107 and Early Quaker Christology, 358.
19. Ibid., 109.
20. Ibid., 109. Revisionist history represented by Elaine Pryce argues that Quietism is a fundamental value throughout Quakerism. According to Pryce early Quakers were Quietist in the sense of mystical experience as “consciousness of the beyond”, rooted in silence and stillness. This tradition of Quietism is in danger of being lost to contemporary Quakerism [Elaine Pryce, “Upon the Quakers and the Quietists: Quietism, Power, and Authority in Late Seventeenth-Century France, and its Relation to Seventeenth-Century Quaker History and Theology”; Quaker Studies 14/2 (2010), 212-23 and “Negative to a Marked Degree’ or ‘An Intense and Glowing Faith’? Rufus Jones and Quaker Quietism”, Common Knowledge 16:3 (Fall, 2010), 518-31.  

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22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 111.
24. Ibid., 129.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 132.
28. Ibid., 136.
29. Ibid., 137.

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