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LABORERS TOGETHER WITH GOD: MAURICE CREASEY AND THE COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS

SALLY BRUYNEEL

Any attempt to articulate a concept of Community and Fellowship within the Religious Society of Friends is fraught with complexity and contradiction. This holds true both historically and in the contemporary moment. Many who earnestly dwell within the Religious Society of Friends struggle with why they should be specifically Quaker in their religious affiliation. Can one be “called” to be a Quaker? Are there things that are a measure of true belonging? Can a particular ideological commitment such as, say, a stand on same-sex marriage have the capacity to exclude one from the community of Friends? As a scholar who studies the theological and social contributions of Friends I have gained an appreciation for the complexities of Quaker belonging. Fortunately narrative, testimony, and a penchant for record-keeping runs through the history of the Religious Society of Friends. These underutilized but essential resources give voice to the Friends who might otherwise be lost in the contemporary context.

In this article we will consider one such voice, that of the Quaker religious and social thinker Maurice Creasey, and his views on the nature of Quaker community and belonging. Given the constraints of space we will focus upon elements essential to his understanding of community: Elders, prayer, and outward-focused fellowship rooted in the Christ event. Within this we will attend to four theological concepts (The People of God, The New Covenant, The “Offices” of Christ, and The Catholic or Universal Church) and what truths they express about community faith and practice. We will explore how his view of the Christ event, and his appreciation of the historical Friends witness, framed his theological thought. It will become evident that though Creasey was an historian at heart, his explicit concern was that the religious expression of contemporary Friends speak to the present day and the spiritual needs of world.¹

Maurice Creasey sought to explain to modern Friends the origins of their religious and social practices that they might recapture their

vitality and address declining membership. But he was also concerned that worshipping communities be spiritually healthy, with good leadership, spiritual practices which emphasize prayer, and outreach to the poor and suffering.² In expressing this it becomes clear that for Creasey, Quakerism is a fellowship unfettered by time, extending in both directions of the arrow of time.³ The written witness of Friends who have gone before still has the capacity to speak meaningfully to the community today⁴ Through his work he expressed a vision of a far-reaching community rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whose light dwells inwardly in every person.⁵ For Creasey, “the distinctive character of the Quaker doctrine of the inner light is that it is a Christological doctrine rather than an anthropological one.”⁶

In this vision, community is a locus for divine revelation. He believed “that the most fruitful approach to an understanding of the nature of our religious fellowship will be one which grows out of our central conviction that ‘every man is enlightened by the divine light of Christ.’”⁷ Each person is the object of divine love and longing, and the seeds of redemption have been divinely implanted in each one. What was needed is a community that is rooted in the Christ event, practiced in prayer and compassion toward the world. This was foundational to Creasey’s theological perspective, and when challenged on it early in his life it proved no idle commitment. His dissatisfaction with the teachings of his early Church affiliation (English Limited and Particular Baptists) led him away from them and he did not return. Of particular difficulty for him was their doctrine of Limited Atonement, a view wherein Christ’s life, death and resurrection occur only for those predestined by God for salvation.

Because of his reading of Christian scripture and his later tuition among Friends, Creasey rejected the idea that Christ’s work was predestined only for some. This commitment led him away from his formative tradition, and from the Limited and Particular Baptists as a whole. His migration to the Religious Society of Friends represented how seriously he believed in the divine compassion that draws all souls to it. These nascent theological commitments would capture him for the rest of his life; he read and wrote extensively on Christology.⁸ He believed that Christ was essentially and ever the lover of all souls, and in the Religious Society of Friends Maurice Creasey found a community that resonated this basic impulse.⁹ (It is thus disappointing from a scholarly perspective that his lifetime of commitment to the historical openness of Friends’ Christology and the unlimited nature of divine compassion should be so undervalued by his critics.)

Though not a ‘birthright’ Quaker, Creasey found their company and practices to be fruitful and compelling. He came to his Quaker identity through close reading of the testimonies of earlier Friends, and completed his doctoral thesis on the work of ideological touchstone, Issac Pennington.¹⁰ However, despite his migration from the Limited Baptist dogma on limited atonement he remained distinctly Christocentric.¹¹ According to Creasey, “God’s character has found perfect expression—not in abstract proposition, nor in an infallible book—but in a Life lived, a Life laid down and a Life taken up again that it may become the life of all.”¹² Christology and the divine call on every human life would remain non-negotiable in Creasey’s understanding of Quaker community which would, ironically, ultimately bring him a certain amount of disappointment and alienation within the Religious Society of Friends.

Maurice Creasey worried that the streams of new belief and practice that entered the Religious Society of Friends in the 1940s and later had watered down the Quaker theological birthright. On this he wrote:

“Friends everywhere are conscious of the fact that our Society, although still used of God in ways beyond our deserving, no longer possesses the vitality and unity which marked its early years. A bewildering variety of teaching passes under the name of Quaker, and there is much uncertainty amongst us as to whether we should regard ourselves as called to give expression to a profound and revolutionary conception of the purpose and scope of God’s dealings with man, or whether we are a religious fellowship which exists primarily in order to give hospitality to the widest possible range of views.”¹³

Creasey believed that waning numbers and influence could be addressed by looking to the beliefs and practices of the larger Friends fellowship, past and present.

He believed being a part of the Religious Society of Friends is to place oneself at the disposal of those who have come before, and to respect the divine revelation that directed them. However, even though we can draw direction and encouragement earlier generations, we are not them. He wrote:

“For early Friends the invisible Church was a larger circle than that of the visible or gathered Church, and embraced within itself all who, whether ‘Jew, Turk or infidel,’ obeyed the ‘secret

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touches' of the 'light of Christ' upon their hearts. With this in mind, we also recognize that we are not the same group as the early Friends. We cannot appropriate their world view nor some of their contextual biases."¹⁴

According to Creasey, each community must recognize the limits of its historical location, and carefully articulate the truth they have received, past and present, in order to carry it forward into the world

To do this, Creasey emphasized the basics, the simple practices that can lead to community thriving. He gave special attention to Elders and to the weighty obligations that are theirs. He held that Elders are charged to be teachers and guides, shepherds and caretakers of the whole history and health of the Religious Society of Friends. Above all else, they are to be persons of prayer and instructors in the same.¹⁵ Without this, individual fellowships lack a practiced hand to guide new members into the fullness of Quaker identity. This requires the gentle challenging of individualistic and self-focused ideas about spirituality, and leading them to greater understanding of what Friends community is about.¹⁶ It also calls for a community looking beyond itself in the devastating problems of poverty, peace, justice, the environment, food and population. Practices and preferences that lead only on an inward and self-enfolding journey lack the power to carry an encounter with the divine back into the world with appropriate intentionality.

The fellowship of Friends exists not just for the tending of themselves but also of the broken and challenging creation in which they exist. Elders have a unique role in assuring this transfer of divine guidance, but every member of the community is called to care for the one another and the wounded world. Creasey wrote, "it is the duty of every single one of us...to give whatever help and encouragement may be possible in our particular circumstances and with our own particular gifts and limitations."¹⁷ We are laborers along with God, working closely to fulfill the divine purpose for creation. In this we have the capacity to draw communities together as they seek to address common and pressing 'real world' challenges. Creasey's model of true community, one he believed was honest to Quaker history and tradition, is one that is directive, intentional, and outward looking. It will discourage individualistic and self-focused spirituality or seeking for its own sake, and go beyond humanitarian service as the measure of its outreach.¹⁸

Vital fellowship will draw upon the “historic continuity and stability of structure” found in the whole of Friends’ witness and experience.¹⁹ This includes a close study of the life and teachings of Christ in order to meet the full potential of the Religious Society of Friends.²⁰ In keeping with this, Creasey articulated four principles that integrate the witness of the community of Friends over time: The People of God, The New Covenant, The Gospel Order (or the “Offices” of Christ), and The Catholic or Universal Church. This first idea of Quakers as “The People of God” was “fundamental to all early Quaker thinking about the Church that it is essentially a community of persons, gathered by God’s spirit to embody and express the divine power and purpose in and for the world.”²¹ As such, Quakers identified themselves with a new reality brought about by the historical life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This was tied to the idea of “The New Covenant” for it was “[i]n and through this event the people of God was reconstituted—freed from all restriction of race or social status, and also from all the ‘carnal ordinances’ or ritual and sacrificial worship.”²² Spiritual seeking and prophetic longing for God’s reign was fulfilled in the Christ event, and with it came “[o]pen access to God, power to fulfill the law, the reality of spiritual communion and fellowship with God and neighbor.”²³ With the New Covenant, Quakers believed that the Church was called out of apostasy into a time when all would know the grace and peace of divine relationship. The nexus of this was Christ. When early Friends gathered together, they did so believing He was present in their midst. There He exercised the Offices of Prophet, Priest and King, Shepherd, Bishop and Counselor.²⁴ The Spirit of God dwelt among them, and their “place was simply to wait upon Him to speak, to order, to prompt and to restrain.”²⁵ This was at the core of their Christocratic fellowship, where mysticism was prophetic rather than individualistic in nature.²⁶

For Creasey, the idea of the “Catholic or Universal” Church was the embodiment of early Friends’ belief and practice. Those who humbly knelt before the light of Christ within them became part of the true Church. The invisible Church went beyond the gathered Church or other exclusionary religious vision. This borderless body “embraced within itself all who, whether ‘Jew, Turk or infidel,’ obeyed the ‘secret touches’ of the ‘light of Christ’ upon their hearts.”²⁷ Creasey’s reference to the work of earlier Friends led many in Quaker circles to see him as irrelevant. However, he stated repeatedly that the

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point of reflecting on the witness of earlier Friends is not to recreate their practices or their theological biases. The purpose is to retain and refresh what was essential. "Friends in the twentieth century... cannot simply repeat these phrases as our answer to the same questions."²⁸ But, asked Creasey, what then is the best way to understand Quaker fellowship in our own day?²⁹

How do Friends respect the past and the present and be true to both? It is not surprising that for Creasey the best answer is one based upon the central conviction that each person is enlightened by the divine light of Christ. The light of Christ "is most truly known when apprehended in its personal and historical embodiment in Jesus; and Jesus is known in the Spirit, in the historically continuous fellowship and tradition of the gathered Christian congregation."³⁰ The challenge here is to be students of both past and present in order to seek out the answers the Spirit will bring to the Friends community, and through them to the world. For Maurice Creasey membership in the Friends fellowship has historically been rooted in the intentional discipleship of Christ, and if Friends take the evidence of the past into themselves one thing becomes apparent: to be a part of the Religious Society of Friends is to accept the obligation of discipleship in Jesus Christ. Maurice Creasey continued to hold to this throughout his life.

The Christological religious leanings of Creasey, along with his affection for the historical community of Friends, made him increasingly anachronistic in his own time. It left him ostracized by many in his own community, which was then breaking from its earlier Christological moorings. As Quaker scholar Ben P. Dandelion has observed, contemporary British Friends "are collectively certain from the rational basis of their liberal approach to faith, that within the religious enterprise, it is impossible and inappropriate to hold any set of beliefs as a final truth for all people for all time. Truth is personal, partial or provisional and seeking is the dominant mode of religious approach."³¹ In the contemporary moment Creasey's work, and his insistence that we honor earlier generations of Friends, might seem quixotic at best. Chuck Fager recently wrote, "[d]espite all his pleadings Creasey had decisively lost out on every one of his main points: by the end of the 1970s, British Quakerism was unmistakably 'Universalist' and pluralist in its religious ethos, indifference to Protestant theology in particular, and seriously religious thought in general was standard."³²

In spending months reading through his original dissertation as well as the excellent new collected works edited by David L. Johns,

I find the life and work of Maurice Creasey to be a cautionary tale on many levels. First, he demonstrates that faithfully belonging to a community does not guarantee the right to a sympathetic hearing. It also points out that no amount of scholarship and reflection ensures that you will change minds, no matter how much you pour into your arguments. The community he had devoted himself to saw his views as irrelevant to the present moment. In the end he knew this, and it diminished him somehow. Yet in vanquishing Creasey I would argue that the Religious Society of Friends was also diminished. For too long, Friends have been deprived of knowledge about their honorable and heroic past. Even if one eschews early Quaker Christology, Friends history is rich with powerful and eloquent voices. It has been my experience that few bother to read the testimonies of those in the past, not even when they have led lives worth emulating. Friends do not know their martyrs, nor do they seem interested in what was worth dying for. This cuts away at true self-knowledge and encourages a spiritual journey that is without perspective, without camaraderie in the dark night of the soul.

ENDNOTES

1. See e.g. Maurice A. Creasey, *The Christ of History and of Experience*, Shrewsbury Lectures, 1967, accessed 04/25/2013 online at <http://shrewsburyquakers.info/lectures/files/ShrewsburyLecture7.pdf> See in particular, “Why We Cannot Still Use Their Meaning With Their Language.” 9
2. He was also concerned that good works and social concerns would not become the primary reason focus of meetings, taking the place of prayer and spiritual growth.
3. From “The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship,” *Essays* 283.
4. From “The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship,” *Essays*, 283, in *Essays of Maurice Creasey, 1912-2004: The Social Thought of a Quaker Thinker*, ed. David Johns. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), cited hereinafter as *Essays*.
5. From “Laborers Together With God,” *Essays*, 258 .
6. *Early Quaker Christology with Special Reference to the Teaching and Significance of Isaac Penington, 1616-1679: An Essay in Interpretation*, Catholic and Quaker Studies #2 (Manasquan, NJ, n.d.; reprint of Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leeds, 1956), 1.
7. From “The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship,” *Essays*, 283
8. Creasey sought to make a distinction between the idea that “God is found in Jesus and can be found nowhere else,” which he did not agree with, and the idea that God can be found everywhere and wherever He is known it is consistent with the witness of Christ. p. 48 essay “Radical Christianity and Christian Radicalism.”
9. What is interesting is that though the theological dogma that Christ died for all features most prominently in England’s Methodist tradition, Creasey found his way to a lifelong affinity for the Quaker community.

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10. *Early Quaker Christology with Special Reference to the Teaching and Significance of Isaac Pennington, 1616-1679: An Essay in Interpretation.* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Leeds, 1956).
11. This is evident already in his 1956 PhD thesis, cited above (*Early Quaker Christology*).
12. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 258.
13. Maurice Creasey, *Christ in Early Quakerism* (Philadelphia: The Tract Association of Friends, n. d.). Accessed 04/20/2013 at <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/creasey.htm>
14. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, .280.
15. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 268.
16. Creasey added: "Let us remember it is no part of the genuine message of Quakerism that each of us carries about within himself a private source of illumination and information concerning God which makes him independent of the knowledge of God which He has been graciously please to give us in his son Jesus Christ," "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 259.
17. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 255.
18. "[S]ervice in the world as Friends, if it is to reach to the depths of the world's need, and if it is to justify our existence as a religious Society, must go far deeper than the humanitarian service." "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 263.
19. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 284
20. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 263
21. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 259
22. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 278
23. *Ibid.*
24. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 279.
25. *Ibid.*
26. "Laborers Together With God," *Essays*, 259.
27. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 280.
28. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 281.
29. "The Ecumenical Role of Friends," *Essays*, 307.
30. "The Nature of Our Religious Fellowship," *Essays*, 283-4.
31. Ben P. Dandelion, "Review of *Collected Essays of Maurice Creasey, 1912-2004*," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27/1 (2012), 167-169, at 168.
32. Chuck Fager, "Review of *Collected Essays of Maurice Creasey, 1912-2004*," *Quaker Theology*, 10/1, Issue 19 (Spring-Summer 2011), 71-76, at 72. Online at www.quaker.org/quest.