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Response to Creasey Papers

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INTRODUCTION

In October 1962 Maurice Creasey was approached by Colin James, then Religious Broadcasting Organizer for the BBC, and invited to offer a radio broadcast to discuss pressing theological concerns. He had attracted the attention of a BBC producer who had read his Vaughan Memorial Lecture, “Lay Christianity.” A decade earlier an Oxford literature professor had been asked to do the same thing and he later published his reflections under the title, *Mere Christianity*. In this occasion, however, Creasey declined the invitation stating that the questions he was asked to address did not interest him. “Why do I need to submit to the authority of the Church’s sacramental discipline?” “Can bishops tell me how to vote?” “Church and state and the position of American Catholics with a Catholic president in a secularized state.” And the final question, which made it obvious the issues he was asked to consider were not drawn from Creasey’s own work but rather from the frustrations of a British Roman Catholic longing for the ecumenical council that had begun a few days earlier: “Can you trust a Catholic trade unionist?”

Perhaps it was because Quakers have little patience for theology in general that Creasey avoided the temptation to spend his credibility on such questions. Nevertheless, it is apparent throughout his work that he had more pressing concerns. He spoke briefly about these in an article published in the *Wayfarer*. “The only theology in which I am interested,” he writes, “is the theology which tries to understand the Truth which we apprehend in religious experience, and which seeks to relate this rightly to Truth as we apprehend it in all other fields.” He was not averse to exploring broad social questions; in fact, a persistent theme in his work is a challenge for Quakers to do precisely that. But as deeply committed to theological reflection as he was, he was also sympathetic to reasons why Friends eschew the process. “If I thought theology was concerned to compel uncritical acceptance of a body of revealed truth,” he wrote, “or that was an intellectual exercise for an educated leisure class, or was a substitute for direct...
personal experience of God, “I would fully share [the] skepticism as to its importance for Friends.”

There are two assertions in Creasey’s remark concerning the kind of theology that interests him: first, theology that did not attend to “the Truth encountered in religious experience” was not worth the effort. In this sense he is aligned with Friends’ conviction about the cruciality of experience and he is convinced that attending to it honors the religious other and recognizes the Presence of God. When he interacted with the wider Church through the ecumenical movement in Britain and beyond, he acknowledged that religious experience outside the Friends community displayed the marks of Truth and carried the weight of revelation. As such, theology’s work is to scratch away at understanding what can be learned from this experience.

Equally as important is the second part of his description—he is interested in theology that “seeks to relate [the understanding of this apprehended Truth] rightly to Truth as we apprehend it in all other fields.” It requires a good deal of confidence to make such a claim: confidence in the human capacity to discern Truth, of course, but even more: it requires confidence in the presence of Truth in all other fields of learning and practice. In one fell swoop, Creasey does what too many Quakers before him were unable or unwilling to do: he validates culture as revelatory and suggests that attention to culture (i.e., human production) is not a distraction to faith but attention to it is requisite to the theological task.

So, on one level Creasey might have been interested in whether one could trust a Catholic trade unionist, but only if this question arose from one’s religious experience.

We can identify three overarching areas to which Creasey directed his intellectual energies—which he regarded as touching upon the living experience of Truth apprehended in religious experience: the significance of Jesus Christ (historically and presently in the life of the faithful), the community itself, its worship and its formative function, and the character of Quaker identity. In one form or another, these animate his work and are expressed in the five sections of the *Collected Writings*. 

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THE REVIEWERS

I am grateful for the five reviews offered by Paul Anderson, Richard Bailey, Jon Kershner, Howard Macy, and Sally Bruyneel. Prior to this QRT forum the secondary literature discussing Creasey consisted of three items: an entry in the second edition of the Historical Dictionary of the Friends (Quakers), the introduction to the Collected Writings of Maurice Creasey, and an article discussing his ecumenical ecclesiology published recently in Quaker Religious Thought.6 Not only is this a small body of material, each of the three was written by the same scholar. Thus, because of the fine work of these five the secondary literature has more than doubled and the number of scholarly voices analyzing Creasey’s considerable contributions has quintupled.

Because it is much too ambitious to respond to five persons responding to twenty essays, I will offer but a few remarks.

Paul Anderson is correct to identify an anomaly in the essay: “The Creative Center of Quakerism.” Creasey identifies three core convictions which we might consider ‘the usual suspects,’ but he introduces a fourth, one that is unusual enough to call attention to itself—from Isaac Penington a call to human transformation through Christ who discloses the salvific intention of God. Perfection of true freedom is grounded in the perfection of bonds, Christ and humanity. Creasey focused his doctoral research at Leeds on Penington’s thought and, consequently, he reads him quite skilfully utilizing him in a number of essays throughout the years. More than this, however, Creasey’s understanding of Quakerism, its origin and intention, is Christological from top to bottom. Arthur Roberts once remarked that the two men were “two of the Scriptural ‘two or three’ gathered together...for Christ-centered renewal among Friends everywhere.”7

Richard Bailey is to be thanked for identifying a serious limitation in Creasey’s articulation of the early Quaker understanding of Christ. In many ways, as sophisticated a thinker as he was, Creasey collapses much into homogeneity. Common nomenclature such as ‘early Friends’ gives the impression there was a kind of historical and ideological uniformity; we know uniformity simply did not exist. Creasey understood this and said as much with regard to nuances between Fox and the early re-interpreters/articulators: Barclay, Keith, Penn, and Penington. However, as Bailey demonstrates, he does not grant equal complexity to Friends’ Christological convictions. Given that Creasey believed Quakers’ most challenging theological question was...
is finding a way to resolve the problem of universals and particulars with regard to Christ, we will need to tread carefully with what appears to be a universalizing propensity in Creasey’s Christological agenda.

Howard Macy provides a helpful summary of a significant body of material that addresses an issue many Quakers consider resolved. He notes that Creasey could be regarded as a “pot stirs” by undertaking a critical analysis of the standard polemic concerning baptism and Eucharist. This may be so. In “Quakers and the Sacraments,” Creasey carefully examines the standard arguments and concludes that the biblical case for Eucharist in particular is terribly weak, both exegetically and theologically. Of course, he was an astute observer of the wider ecumenical movement and the experience of Christians in the Churches; but his assessment was not a Catholic or an Anglican one; it was a Quaker critique of the Quaker critique of the sacraments.

Jon Kershner’s title alludes to a persistent frustration for Creasey and that which led to his eventual disillusionment with Friends. He wanted nothing short of a radical re-thinking and re-minting of Quakerism—shake it to its core. Of course, this is rarely a popular position in any institution. Nevertheless, this re-formation is what was required in order to be faithful to the originating vision and experience of Quakers. Whereas Penn called for the revival of “primitive Christianity,” Creasey reacted to a kind of parochial “primitive Quakerism revived.” He pushed hard against this and against the secularizing drift within British Quakerism, a secularism accompanied by a romanticized view of Quaker origins. Not surprisingly, in his final remarks to students at Woodbrooke, Creasey urged his audience to reject any effort to recapture the primitive origins of the movement—that way is closed.

Sally Bruyneel points to a tension in Creasey: did his vision of community place him outside the frontiers of an identifiable Quakerism. As she notes, his remarks indicate he is little interested in denominational affiliation or the conventionally defined spaces of religious association. Yet, as I think Bruyneel recognizes, Creasey’s position is not a result of antinomianism but of a deep sense of the Presence of Christ experientially known. Communities of faith do not form in order to change the world; Quakerism so defined will disappoint. These communities form and they are changed radically from the inside out. From this experience of transformation they are, as in the Abramic covenant, a means whereby the world is touched by grace.
CONCLUSION

I am grateful for the careful attention these five have given to exploring the writings contained in this book. It is my hope that the Collected Essays of Maurice Creasey will continue to do precisely what it is doing in this QRT forum—clarify, provoke, unsettle, encourage. It is quite true that Creasey was not the last word in Quaker thought while he was alive and he certainly is not now. Nevertheless, while some insights may be dated, it is remarkable how refreshing his perspective is, how urgent and timely the concerns he addresses, and how clearly he articulates an intelligent Christian Quaker faith. It is difficult to find many who are as loving and knowledgeable an insider as he was; at the same time, it is equally difficult to find an insider courageous enough to evaluate critically the foundational convictions of Quaker identity.

Creasey’s desire was to awaken theological curiosity and inspire clarity of thought animated by love of God. In many ways, his vision of theological work is precisely what one would expect a Friendly approach to be, but it takes unexpected turns as well. As already noted, he did not regard every approach to theological reflection as useful, only efforts to understand truth in religious experience and how this truth is known in other dimensions of human learning. “Theology prescribes, not the end to be attained, but the method to be followed if any end worth attaining is to be reached at all.” Thus, unlike the direction the BBC invited him to take—providing answers to tangled questions—he was committed to a theology attuned to a particular texture of thought and life that may simply call faith-full.

ENDNOTES

2. Personal correspondence: Maurice Creasey to Colin C. W. James (October 30, 1962). The questions were included with a letter from James: Personal correspondence: Colin C. W. James to Maurice Creasey (October 26, 1962).
3. Maurice Creasey, “Quakerism and Theology,” Wayfarer 35 (February 1956): 17-19. This essay is not included in the Collected Writings. The Wayfarer was published from 1922-1964; then subsequently as Quaker Monthly (1965-present).
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Ibid., 17.

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Creasey, “Quakerism and Theology,” 19.