

2013

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul N. (2013) "Quakers As Radical Christians – Maurice Creasey's Theological Assessment of Essential Quakerism," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 120 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol120/iss1/2>

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QUAKERS AS RADICAL CHRISTIANS—MAURICE CREASEY’S THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF ESSENTIAL QUAKERISM

PAUL N. ANDERSON

As David Johns has argued well in the latest issue of *Quaker Religious Thought* (#119, 2012, pp. 45-58), Maurice Creasey’s ecumenical vision of the Quaker movement sees it not as a sectarian enclave, seeking to bolster its influence in the world via its self-referentiality and ideological repristinization. Rather, the best way to be Quaker, and even to further the movement’s prospering, is less a factor of imitating external traits (which would have transgressed diametrically the convictions of Fox and Barclay) but to recover the spiritual vitality of early Friends—patterned after a vision of the recovery of vitality of primitive Christianity—experienced inwardly and transformingly. In that sense, early Friends were seeking to be radical Christians, in Creasey’s view, and such is the calling of would-be faithful Friends in every generation.

In my judgment, this will ever involve the distinguishing of timeless Testimonies from time-bound distinctive expressions, which are always in flux. One of the easy confusions of Friends is to mistake Christian Testimonies central to the gospel of Christ for their distinctive applications.¹ In this excellent gathering of Maurice Creasey’s most important Quaker writings, David Johns fittingly begins the first of five sections with the heading, “The Quaker as Radical Christian.” The four essays included in this section reflect a variety of published venues, but they cohere remarkably well and get the collection off to a lively, attention-grabbing start.

I. THE QUAKER AS A RADICAL CHRISTIAN

In the first essay, Creasey declares the thrust of his argument by outlining four points (1-2):

1. There is emerging at the present time, within and beyond the churches, a fresh, living, revolutionary and costing vision of the meaning for every man of what came to expression in Jesus, and of what the Christian churches ever since have both witnessed to and betrayed. This vision is what I mean by radical Christianity.
2. The dynamic quality of the original Quaker movement derived from the faithfulness with which, in terms of its own historical situation, it was a response to essentially this same vision.
3. The subsequent vicissitudes of Quakerism are best understood in terms of a) tensions between this original vision and the successive religious, intellectual and cultural influences which shaped it; and b) the varying extent to which the elements of this vision were kept in living and organic balance and relation with one another.
4. The fruitful and creative potential of the Quaker movement will be realized and communicated only in so far as it discerns and sustains its role as an expression of radical Christianity.

From there Creasey proceeds by defining Christian radicalism as possessing several features. First, it is critical of tradition and structures in that it is always willing to improve upon the givens it receives. Second, it involves an ongoing, practical re-apprehension of the meaning Christ for every person—a dynamic approach to discipleship. Third, it will always be experiential in terms of authentic and transformative worship. Fourth, Christian radicalism involves corporate features—rethinking Christian community from that center of worship and discipleship.

That being the case, Creasey reflects upon recent interpretations of the beginnings of Quakerism. With appreciation for Rufus Jones' view of *continental mysticism*, Geoffrey Nuttall's view of *left-wing Puritanism*, and Lewis Benson's view of *the true form and function of the church* as lenses through which to glimpse the early Quaker vision, Creasey seizes upon George Hunston Williams' research on "the Radical Reformation" as a lens through which to glimpse the essence of the early Quaker movement. This is preferable to tendencies among British Friends to see the movement either a temporary corrective or a permanent home for those disaffected with traditional or "orthodox" churches.

Based on their critiques of Reformers not having reformed fully enough, Creasey shows how early Friends embodied Christian radicalism. With their emphases upon *intimate acquaintance with* versus *mere knowledge about*, the Lamb's War, and inward and authentic change versus superficial semblances, he argues that this original work of Friends is what is needed in the world today. And, there is no better way to describe the original Quaker vision than to call it "radical Christianity."

Central to this vision are *expressions of prophetic faith*, which are in contrast to *religion*—that which seeks to balance the natural and the supernatural. Conversely, prophetic faith moves toward actualizing "what ought to be instead of sanctifying that which is." (11) Dual dangers here include assimilation with the culture—becoming just like other movements, and, identification with religious particularities—being proud of a movement's distinctives. In my language, this results in the forfeiting of one's witness and Testimonies in favoring one's distinctiveness.

At this point, however, Creasey commits an error of factual judgment. Within its emerging history, he claims, Quietism led to "the largely uncritical adoption by Friends of the evangelical nonconformist position in doctrine, practice and attitude." (15) In adopting missions and pastoral systems, "The recognition of their incompatibility with the original Quaker insights was a main cause of the separations which fragmented the Society in the nineteenth century." (16) While pastoral systems and missions endeavors exhibited and fomented fragmentation among Friends in the late 19th century and forward, the main Quaker divisions (Hicksite-Orthodox—1827-1828 and Gurneyite-Wilburite—1845-1856) preceded those developments by half a century or so. Further, Creasey highlights the missional endeavors of early Friends as an oft-overlooked feature of their Christian radicalism, so a bit of nuancing on this point would have served the argument better.

Key to being a radical Christian is the *acceptance of discipleship*, which involves transformative participation in *worship*, embracing a living *faith*, engaging in *corporate life* meaningfully, and operating within it *institutional aspects* and structure effectively.

2. RADICAL CHRISTIANITY AND CHRISTIAN RADICALISM

In the second essay, Creasey continues his analysis by juxtaposing “radical Christianity” with “Christian radicalism.” Over and against four contemporary moods (secularity, acquaintance with major world religions, current ecumenicity, and an emphasis upon “earthed” Christianity—charismatic, subjective, mystical, or experiential) he develops an image of radicality as going to the *root* of things (*radix* means “root” in Latin).

Further, he contrasts authentic radicalism with contemporary associations. Failing to deliver are: a) negative critical attitudes such as Christian atheism, death-of-God theologians, “man come of age”; likewise, b) social activism working tirelessly against discrimination and injustice. These are vulnerable to three lines of criticism. They are uncritically modern, credulous of ideologies that others criticize, and most egregiously, they think what they are proposing is “new”. Says Creasey, “My claim, therefore, implicit in a good deal of what I have already said, is, in part, that there is need for a more organic, coherent, corporate and comprehensive Christian radicalism than is yet generally available.” (29)

This calls for viewing *Radical Christianity* and *Christian Radicalism* against the broadest background possible—between religion and prophetic faith:

Greatly oversimplifying the issues, I would say that religion in all its forms, Christian and non-Christian, ancient and modern, is mainly preoccupied with the expression in ritual and cultic forms, of men’s [sic] need to reassure themselves of the dependability of existence. It seeks to ensure, express and perpetuate an underlying harmony between natural and supernatural, God and man, and to shed some light upon the ultimate and inescapable mysteries of life and death. It tends, beneath all its obvious differences of form, to be in substance static, rather than dynamic, sustaining what is, rather than urging forward towards what should be. Prophetic faith, by contrast, came into the world as an expression of the conviction that man is in the world, not simply to understand it, nor simply to harmonize his with its recurrent rhythms and changeless requirements but, rather, to be responsible for it and to enter into a partnership with God to change it. It looks to history rather than to nature

as the primary medium of revelation, to the past and to the future as conferring meaning upon the present. (29-30)

The way forward avoids two disastrous weaknesses that have beset the Christian community throughout the ages: theological timidity and ethical insensitivity. (32) Creasey shows in a second overview how Quakerism in the 17th century sought to embody the root of the original Christian faith and practice, which held a proper balance between religion and prophetic faith. In so doing, early Friends sought to challenge both Roman Catholicism and Magisterial Protestantism.

George Fox and William Penn, Robert Barclay and Isaac Penington, commended the Reformers of the previous century, but also criticized them for not having been radical enough. As they expressed it, the Protestant Reformers had indeed lopped off many stout branches of false doctrine and un-Christian practice, but they had not grubbed out the roots. It is important to notice that the early Quakers did not ground their criticisms in any claim that some new revelation had been given in their own century which should supersede the Christian one. Rather, they condemned their contemporaries for their failure to see and to be faithful to the truth as it was embodied in Jesus and as it was experienced and proclaimed in “the days of the Apostles.” (43)

As Creasey identifies these attributes within the early Quaker movement, shows how its dynamic Christocentricity² really did revive the days of the apostles and combined the best of radical Christianity and Christian radicalism.

3. THE CREATIVE CENTER OF QUAKERISM

In his third essay, Creasey upholds four values of Friends that comprise the “creative center of Quakerism.” They include three well-known convictions and a fourth as a lesser-known value:

1. *“Every man is enlightened by the divine light of Christ.”*
2. *“Answering that of God in every man.”*
3. *“A great people to be gathered.”*
4. *“The perfection of the true liberty lies in the perfection of bonds.”*

In bringing the fourth value to our attention, as articulated by Isaac Penington, Creasey restores the needed focus upon the transformative power of Christ, which by any measure was central to the original Quaker vision.³ I believe the challenge is how to embrace and articulate a theology seeking to actualize transformative religious experience rather than simply describe it. According to Creasey, “All that I have said so far may be summed up by saying that the creative center which both gave birth to Quakerism and was powerfully and organically expressed in its early period was a fresh, deep and courageous insight into the inexhaustible meaning of God’s self disclosure in Jesus Christ.” (59)

Two problems accompany this venture: the polarities of universality and particularity of ethical fragmentation. “The question confronting us, therefore, is: How can we ourselves, in this bewildering situation, begin again to live from Quakerism’s creative center so that we may commend it to others in word and in action?” (64) According to Creasey, we must become the people we claim to be—knowing the divine Presence in our midst (70) as our Source and Creative Center. This leads, then, to his final essay within this section.

4. A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION—DISCIPLESHIP

Once again, operating in a four-fold pattern, Creasey affirms central features of discipleship as a Christian affirmation for Friends:

1. The Incomprehensible Source—*We believe that, upholding the universe as its creative source and final goal, is the constant, holy, loving purpose of God.* (72-76)
2. The Revelation and the Truth—*We believe that, glimpsed in nature and implied in the moral and spiritual aspirations of mankind, this purpose is concretely embodied in and perfectly responded to by Jesus of Nazareth, who is thus rightly recognized as the Christ, the decisive and definitive revelation of the reality of both God and man, and the truth of their relationship.* (76-80)
3. Bearing Witness—*We believe that what was realized in him continues to create and inform the Church, the community through which the purpose of God to unify and restore the whole creation is now finding expression.* (81-85)

4. God's Eternal Purpose—*We believe that the full and final achievement of this [God's] purpose necessarily transcends the limits of our individual lives and of the history of the race; but that this hope sustains, judges and justifies our every effort to cooperate with it here and now.* (85-90)

Because God's truth is revealed in Jesus Christ, Christ as the Light is at work within every person. It is through God's revelation in the person of Jesus that the Ground and Source of our being is known, and it is through the ongoing revelational work of Jesus as the Christ that God's truth continues to be disclosed. It is not only to this conviction that Friends are called to testify, but it is within that dynamic relationship that prophetic witness has its root. As the original Quaker vision of "a great people to be gathered" was a vision of "the purpose of God to unify and restore the whole creation," it is in faithfulness to this original calling that Friends fulfill their individuality and potentiality. It is in knowing the Father and his Son (Jn. 17:3) in the "here and now: that Friends also 'know one another in that which is eternal.'" (90)

EVALUATION

In reviewing these four essays by Creasey, several observations come to mind, as well as a reflection or two. First, David Johns should be commended for gathering such a fine set of essays and ordering them so helpfully; thank you, David! I'm impressed at the reinforcement of familiar themes, an inescapable feature of gathering disparate essays in a larger collection, without too much redundancy. This is helpful, in my view, rather than a problem.

Second, I am very impressed with Creasey's linear-progressive, organized thought. He clearly has reflected on these issues long and hard, and his work brings the fruit of sustained analysis to the fore in ways that interested readers on varying levels can use. I am especially appreciative of his doing Quaker theology within the larger setting of contemporary theology—engaging a broad diversity of perspectives and theological opinions fruitfully. This is something that many a Quaker opiner too often fails to do; many Friends love doing theology (even if they critique what they think it is, or perspectives within the field) without having engaged seriously the best minds of the day (let alone throughout history). Creasey shows lucidly the

value of a theologically-engaged theological contribution in ways likely to make a difference within the Friends movement and beyond it. Nothing shows the theological naïveté of some Friends as clearly as the statement: “Oh, Quakers don’t do theology, we just talk about the meaning of faith and practice for our lives and what is needed in the world.” That *is* theology; the question is whether the venture is adequately engaged or impoverished by tendencies toward self-referentiality and shallow engagements of otherwise world-changing convictions.

A third comment is that I believe Creasey has indeed gotten it right in his analysis of radical Christianity and Christian radicalism as the heart of Christian faith and practice—and therefore a pretty fine scald on the vision of early Friends as it relates to how later generations might carry that vision forward. Here’s where the challenge sets in. How do we distinguish the religious and the prophetic concern? How do we discern what is an eternal Testimony, to be upheld as central to the everlasting gospel—transcending time and place—when compared to time-bound distinctives as contextual expressions of such? And, how do we engage the living, dynamic, reality of Christ-centered living, leading to being receptive and responsive to the present leading? Such a dynamic stance toward radical Christianity and Christian radicalism is what Friends have sought to embody, and yet a “not-yet” feature inevitably accompanies the “already” features of the pilgrimage.

I close with a question: *How do we do meaningfully what is here adumbrated—engaging the dynamic reality rather than the external trappings of faith?* Here I might suggest benefiting from historic stances, but also going beyond them to the spiritual essence and reality whence they have sprung. With the counsel of Creasey (and Johns) regarding the great theological works of early Friends, read their works; benefit from their analyses; learn from them. But, also do what they were and are doing—seeking to revive “primitive Christianity,” as William Penn put it, building upon what we know now about Jesus and the movement of his followers.⁴ And yet, Jesus and his followers were also seeking to actualize God’s reign and leadership (kingdom) on earth as it is in heaven based upon *their* understandings of how God works. So, how do we imitate what they were doing as well as seeking to embrace their findings?

Essentially, how do we open ourselves to the dynamic Spirit of God, which blows as it will, despite our failure to know the whence

and whither of its inspiration (John 3:3-8)? When we get to that place, perhaps then we will become radically Christian... *and* Quaker.

ENDNOTES

1. This error became apparent to me as the title second of my essays in the *Meet the Friends* series (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1982), “Quaker Distinctives,” in which I described peculiarities and interesting stories of Friends, came to be used by some as a means of referring to Friends Testimonies described in the other essays: Worship, Ministry, Peacemaking, Sacramentality, and a transcendent view of the Kingdom of God. Changing the title in the third revised edition (2011) to “Quaker Testimonies and Distinctives,” I clarified the issue as follows:

Early Friends sought to recover the spiritual vitality of the first Christians, and this led them to raise several *Testimonies* to what it means to follow Jesus. While Testimonies are timeless convictions, they were applied in timely and distinctive ways. This is why Friends’ Testimonies and distinctives should *not* be confused.

Friends’ Testimonies include the convictions that *worship* should be in Spirit and in truth; that *ministry* should be universal and Spirit-filled; that *sacramental reality* is inward and directly mediated; that *peaceable means to peaceable ends* should be prioritized; that *plain speech* and *simple living* are normative for all Christians; and that Christ can be trusted to *lead his followers directly* if they will attend his present leadership.

But Testimonies are not mere “options” for Christians to embrace if they care to or discard if they don’t. They are upheld as direct implications of Christ-centered living. Note, however, distinctive applications of these timeless convictions.

2. This is the language I use to describe what I believe is the heart of Quaker faith and practice in Paul Anderson, “A Dynamic Christocentricity—The Center of Faithful Praxis,” *QRT* 105 (2005): 20-36.
3. See, for instance, the analysis by Arthur O. Roberts, *Through Flaming Sword; The Life and Legacy of George Fox* (2nd ed., Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2008) and also that of Carole Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), both of which argue for personal transformation unto holiness as a central feature of the early Quaker vision and experience.
4. This is why Henry J. Cadbury gave his disciplinary life to studying the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus, and early Christianity. And, in his peace and social work, as well as his scholarly work alike, he was “translating the New Testament” in his day and setting. Nobel Peace Prizes have been awarded for lesser ventures.