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Early Quaker Christology: with special reference to the teaching and significance of Isaac Penington 1616-1679: an essay in interpretation

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Creasey argues that the concept of the 'inner light' must be understood in Christological terms, but also that traditional Christological formulas are less valuable than knowing Christ experimentally; and that Christ the Light is redemptively active throughout creation: the Incarnation embodies and makes fuller and more explicit universal truths. He describes the roots of these principles in 17th century Quakerism, especially in Isaac Penington, whose emphasis on knowing Christ experimentally avoided the pitfalls associated with the evangelical and rationalist streams of Quakerism alike – streams which are, for Creasey, strangely alike in their errors – as well as the abstract and ethically detached, even distorted, emphasis on Christological orthodoxy and schemes of atonement and justification in the Protestantism of the time.

Keywords: 17th Century Quakerism, doctrine and theology of; Isaac Penington; Christ/Christology, soteriology (doctrine of salvation), Inner Light, Trinity, inward and outward, Spirit/pneumatology (study of the Spirit), relationship of doctrine and practice, ecumenism (relations between churches or denominations), Biblical theology.

Who it would be useful for: Theologians and historians of doctrine, and ecumenists.

Section 1: Introduction

Part A:

Creasey argues that that ‘the Quaker doctrine of the inner light is a Christological rather than an anthropological doctrine’: that is, while it is ‘generally recognised that the central and distinctive doctrine of the Society of Friends is its doctrine of the ‘Inner Light’’, Creasey contends that ‘the features of this doctrine which can truly be said to be distinctive of Quakerism are those which result from the Quaker attempt to express, in terms of a doctrine of inner light, an interpretation of the Person and work of Christ.’ The historical revelation of God in Christ is central to a correct understanding of the ever-present inner light; indeed that light is a kind of *personal* presence.

Despite the Quaker suspicion of doctrine, 17th c Quakerism ‘possessed a remarkably full doctrine of the Person and work of Christ’. This doctrine sought to correct aspects of contemporary Christology, and even anticipated certain subsequent developments of Protestant Christology. Expression in terms of the inner light tended to make contemporaries suspicious that all Quakers meant was the natural light of reason or conscience, and the exposition of the doctrine of inner light by Quakers of a philosophical bent tended to vitiate the original personal, Christological insights. In reaction to these things, a tendency arose to under-emphasise ‘those distinctive and important New Testament insights which the early Quaker leaders had sought to express in the language of inner light’. In turn, the reaction to this was expression in more conventional Protestant doctrinal formulations.

Creasey defines his position against that of Rufus Jones. Jones saw the essential message of the first Quakers as ‘a simple rediscovery of the truth of the divine immanence in man’ (Creasey), placing them in the succession of some medieval mystics and the German Spiritual Reformers. Fox knew no ‘school metaphysics’ but called people to ‘that of God in themselves’, freed from the ‘encasing bonds of man-made doctrines’ (Jones). Barclay ‘lock[ed] up this new idea in [the] old system’ of Protestant dogmatics. Jones’s account is implicitly ambiguous about any distinction between the inner light and the ‘natural light’, and undermines the specifically Christian doctrinal content of Quakerism. Consonant with these things he has an optimistic view of human nature, in contrast to Barclay’s ‘Augustinian’ and even ‘Calvinist’ view. As we have seen, Creasey argues for a definite distinction between nature and the divine presence in the soul, and for the Christian character of Quakerism; he also holds that ‘Fox was as little inclined as Barclay to take a favourable view of the nature of man’. In fact the understanding of Quakerism deriving from Jones is precisely what Creasey has in his sights: early Quakerism ‘was a fresh and vivid recovery of certain New Testament insights concerning the Person and work of Jesus Christ’, and the interpretations of Quakerism that emphasise either a ‘speculative and rationalistic’ account of the inner light (reduction to the natural light), or a generic spirituality, belong in the same stable. Creasey thinks they both owe a lot to Jones and less to Fox and the early ‘Publishers of Truth’.

However, Creasey also argues that the reaction which occurred in the opposite direction, towards 'the position of the majority of Protestant denominations', represents a tendency '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'. He suggests that the tension between the rationalistic and generic spiritual views on the one hand, and the evangelical on the other, were exacerbated by the failure of anyone at all, even the early Quakers (whose solution was 'crude and premature'), to find 'appropriate terms' in which to express the 'Christological insights'. But the early Quakers were the first to strike out along the paths that 'the movement of theological thought during the last three hundred years' has been pursuing with 'a better hope of success'.

According to Creasey, rather than focusing on metaphysical problems concerning the Person of Christ to the neglect of his work, it is better to concentrate on his role in the 'divine drama of creation and new creation', in which 'the words and deeds of [Christ's] earthly life come as the fulfilment and interpretation of a divine purpose which ... was at work throughout the whole history of the people of God' and embraces all men in its effects. For Creasey, both those who use the language of 'formal Christological orthodoxy' and their opponents represent Quakerism 'as a system of ideas, of doctrines. These might be either more evangelical or more rationalistic; but in either case the intensely inward and experimental nature of Quaker faith was obscured.' Isaac Penington 'avoided many of the dangers inherent in both an evangelical orthodoxy and a speculative rationalism ... by reason of his own apprehension of the Person and work of Christ'.

Part B:

Fox's original apprehension was of 'Christ Jesus'; it was Christ the person who had given him his light, spirit and grace, indeed, 'himself'. The divine light that enlightens every man is Christ, not an impersonal principle. This light is not 'natural nor created'. Fox uses the term to cover 'many of the activities which, in the New Testament, are variously ascribed to the Logos, to the incarnate Christ, to the risen and glorified Christ and to the Holy Spirit.' The 'natural darkness of the human heart' fallen in Adam is often asserted by Fox; our candle needs to be lit by grace. George Bishop clearly advances the same views. The only distinction between Christ and the Light is his earthly body. The Seed means the measure of Christ in each; these appellations are distinguished from one another and from the person of Christ only by their effects. Similarly robust statements are cited from Samuel Fisher and Isaac Penington, for whom the light was 'no unfallen soul-centre' (Creasey). An Anglican clergyman's letter is quoted to show that non-Quakers sometimes acknowledged 'by the Light within they understand Christ', and do not oppose it to the scriptures. However, given the Quakers' general use of the term Light for the Logos, the incarnate Lord, the risen Lord and so on, it was understandable that some should see them as either reducing the Light of Christ to the natural light or evacuating the term of its historical reference to the man Jesus Christ.

Part C:

As a generalisation, a 'rediscovery of Christ' lay at the heart of the Reformation: of a personal Christ, revealed in scripture and encountered in the sacraments. But there was a scholastic obscuring of this fresh apprehension. Lutheran Christology tended to exalt the humanity, but by doing so became insensitive to its own fundamental principle of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Reformed Christology emphasised the reality of the humanity; Quaker expositions show two important features of Reformed Christologies: the personal human qualities of Jesus, wrought by the Spirit in his human character and will and not straightforwardly a natural consequence of the union of natures; and – by Penington in particular – the 'eclipse' of divine attributes *in carne*, which were still possessed by the Logos *extra carnem*. This latter was under-emphasised by Friends generally on account of the pre-occupation with the eternal and indwelling Christ the Light.

However, Creasey thinks that the Quakers were right to find Christ's divine humanity more in relationship than in doctrinal speculation. He quotes the Cambridge Platonist Henry More approvingly, expressing sympathy for those who hold that 'after this dead Form of Religion and external flattery of the Person of Christ, which has continued too many Ages, there will succeed a more general Reign of the Spirit of Life and experimental Knowledge of his Sceptre and Power in us'. For Creasey, 'the direction taken by the main stream of Protestant thought was not one which led towards' a solution to the questions 1. 'How can that Person who lived on earth among men be one with that Presence who is known and honoured in the worship and obedience of Christians today?' 2. 'If he is the one Mediator for all men everywhere and always, what is the relationship to those who have never consciously heard of or known him? The Quakers, working with suggestions 'contained in the Pauline and Johannine writings' to a greater extent than some of them acknowledged, 'began to interpret the significance of Jesus Christ in terms which offered answers to [these] two great questions ... which were at every point intimately related to moral and spiritual experience ... not merely of the pious individual but of the worshipping community.' There were 'crudities, exaggerations, distortions'; but like the pioneers of physical science in the same period, they were 'working upon that which they 'knew experimentally' [as Fox said]. Those who have built on the foundations they laid have 'confirmed the broad truth of what they perceived', for Creasey.

Section 2: An exposition of early Quaker Christology

Parts A and B:

The distinctive emphasis and interests of early Quaker Christology were due to the vicissitudes of their early religious experience: God had given to each in particular 'a Light from himself shining in our hearts and consciences ... Christ his Son [who] lighted every man'. In this they found relief from the burden of sin, which nothing else had been able to remove, and new life, and a 'sufficient teacher'.

We can hardly look to them for speculative doctrinal constructions; the knowledge of Christ they are interested in comes from experience. There was also a strongly apocalyptic aspect to their experience.

Part C:

Who is Christ, and what does he do in his pre-incarnate state? This must be understood in the context of Quaker views on the Trinity. They say that the use of the word 'Person' regarding the Father the Son and the Spirit is too 'carnal', as well as unscriptural; in effect they think it implies tritheism. (Fox and Burrough, for example.) The Quaker experience however is a Trinitarian experience, to the extent that they could all say, with Fox and with the New Testament writers, 'the Father of life drew me to his Son by his Spirit.' But they think of the Father, Son and Spirit as different ministries or manifestations of the same God.

The incarnate Christ localises and historicises the same work done by the pre-incarnate and eternal Christ: the Light and Christ are one and the same. They refer to John chapter 1 in this context. Samuel Fisher calls Christ 'he that before then was come, and then came, and is come, and comes, and is to come, from the beginning to the end, the first and last, the Light of Men, and Life of such as will be led by him to it.' This principle 'hath ever striven with men in the Fall to recover [them]' (Keith). Thus there is, as Creasey says, 'a strenuous attempt to interpret the whole moral and spiritual history of the race in terms of the divine purpose revealed in Christ.'

Before turning to the obvious question raised by this – what significance Quakers attached to the historical incarnation itself – Creasey mentions two other characteristic doctrines: the pre-existent humanity of Christ, and 'the extension of the soul of Christ throughout the universe'. Both will be seen to be important for Penington later. Keith (who is notably orthodox in his Trinitarian views) is a major exponent of both, the second following from the first. He argues that in order for former generations to have drunk from the spiritual rock which was Christ (before his incarnation), there must in some sense have existed a man – at least, the soul or inward, spiritual part of man, 'as well as' (so to speak) the Logos. Barclay picks up this doctrine. For Keith, this, Christ's 'spiritual humanity' must clearly be ubiquitous. These doctrines emphasise a Quaker commitment to Christ's 'ultimate ground in the being of God, and also a real relationship with the humanity of every man'. There is, however, clearly a tension with the 'experimental and non-speculative character' of 'the original Quaker doctrine of the Person and work of Christ'.

Part D:

Creasey now turns to the early Quaker view of the historic incarnation. The relationship between the divine and human in Christ must be understood in the context of their view of the relationship between these two in general. Fox seems to deny any distinction except as a result of sin, ie in those not reconciled. In fact he says that the soul, being immortal, is of God, and the body out of the earth. Christ's flesh, on the other hand, 'came down from above'. The early Quakers generally emphasise

continuity rather than difference between the pre- and incarnate Christ. They seem to deny either Christ's human soul or the earthliness of his flesh. Barclay is more orthodox and emphasises the atonement in terms of sacrifice. Nayler insists that the work depends on the Person of Christ, though like his fellows he has a better grasp on the latter than the former (Creasey argues). He insists that no intellectual grasp is of any use without an 'experimental' acquaintance with the redemption provided in the historical Christ. Not all tie this redemption so closely to the historic incarnation as he or Fox or Barclay do; for whom the Light has shone more brightly since the incarnation.

Part E:

The early Quakers assert the personal existence of the risen Christ, they do not mean 'some kind of immanent principle'. Scripture must be read in the Light, which shines in the reason and conscience of the redeemed, not identified with them. They do not distinguish between different kinds of grace, or between justification and sanctification, reflecting the refusal to distinguish between his historic work and present working. Good works were Christ's own, working in the believer. This leads them to take very seriously the idea of the church as the body of Christ, and the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit: Christ dwells in the heart of the believer. The Quaker doctrine of perfection follows from this, but it refers to the possibility of not sinning, not to the impossibility of sinning, in this world at any rate. For Fox, Christ rules and ministers to his people as prophet, priest and king, both individually, and communally. For example, in Creasey's words, 'Since Christ alone, as Prophet, has the right to speak in his Church, the only acceptable worship, in spirit and in truth, will ... wait in silence for Christ himself to speak.' The message is that of his priestly reconciliation. In the case of the sacraments, the inward and visible grace was claimed without the outward and visible sign, and the sign dismissed as merely outward (or, the believers were the outward sign). It is the privilege of all believers to sup with Christ inwardly. Christ's eschatological state and role are held in something very like the orthodox sense: he is human but ubiquitous, and will come again to judge, for the kingdom is both now and not yet. So Quaker ideas of the church, ministry and worship flow from a vivid sense of the presence of the risen Lord; and Erastianism (the church as the spiritual branch of the state) was intolerable to them as a consequence. Creasey adds an appendix on the relationship between certain Quakers, notably Keith, and the Cambridge Platonists (especially Henry More) and the circle around Anne Conway.

Section 3: Some contemporary theological criticisms

John Bunyan, John Owen and Henry More.

Bunyan accuses the Quakers of denying the 'outward and historic Christ in the interest of an inward or subjective experience' (Creasey), which as far as he is concerned is to be identified with 'the

convictions of the law' (Bunyan). For Bunyan the Quaker inner light is natural conscience which can only convict of sin. In response Burrough argued that Christ 'shall be Salvation and Redemption where his [historical] person never came; and yet it cannot be said Here is the Place where the Son of God is not.' He is, however, ambiguous concerning any difference between the Light and conscience, and this reflects his difference with Bunyan over justification.

Owen respected the edification possible through silent meetings, but suspected the Quakers on similar grounds to Bunyan. But Creasey argues that his conception of the Person and work of Christ 'are more closely akin to some held by Quakers than either he or they realised.' For both, belief in Christ, and belief in doctrines about him, are not the same. Like the Quakers, Owen emphasised that all truth comes as a beam from Christ, though he insisted on the need for outward media of revelation for a saving knowledge of Christ. Yet he is able to say, 'to confine the offices of Christ, as unto their virtue, power, and efficacy, unto the times of the Gospel only, is utterly to evacuate the first promise, with the covenant of grace founded thereon. And their minds are secretly influenced by a disbelief of his divine person, who suppose that the respect of the Church unto Christ, in faith, love, trust and instruction, commenceth from the date of his incarnation.' Though Owen confines this to the Hebrew people, indeed to those who possessed faith in the coming deliverer, there is still a comparison between his view of 'general revelation' and that of Quakers like Barclay. Further, for both Owen and the Quakers, the incarnation is a revelation of God precisely through his veiling by a human nature. As compared to the Quakers, Owen is apt to emphasise the fullness of Christ's human nature, rather than just his body, but also the ongoing importance of Christ's having a real body.

Samuel Fisher challenged Owen that despite acknowledging a 'fundamental and far-reaching nature of the knowledge of God conferred by ... the 'light of nature', it is entirely distinct from a 'spiritual knowledge' of God', notably from any knowledge of Christ. Fisher insisted that there was a supernatural dimension to the light, going beyond the purely natural; Owen refused to accept that Quaker teaching amounted to any more than the natural light. Fisher accused the Calvinist Owen and other 'personal Electionists' of limiting God's love to the Elect: for the Quakers the Person and work of Christ have significance for all; there is a 'deep and mysterious relationship between the moral intuitions of the race and the grace and truth which were finally embodied historically in Jesus Christ'.

In this respect More is sympathetic to the Quakers, as well as being much gentler and less polemical about them; but he too is concerned that they depreciate the importance of scripture and the incarnation: their fondness for allegorical interpretation even of the events of the life of Christ tends to make his history 'a mere Fable. But if, instead of making them Resemblances, we should use them as Arguments from a true History, they have a Power unspeakable for the making us good.' Otherwise religion is no more than it was 'in the days of the Patriarchs'; the incarnation simply makes no difference. Although he acknowledges that not all Quakers are Christologically unorthodox, More discerns a potential for separating the external and inner Christ, and for confusing the relationship between God and human nature in Christ, and in us. He is also concerned by a lack of control on just

what does and does not come from the Inner Light, thinking that this can lead to enthusiasm and a depreciation of reason.

Section 4: Quaker doctrinal reactions and developments

The need to defend their beliefs from criticisms such as these, as well as to justify their inclusion under the Toleration Act on the grounds of Christological orthodoxy, led late 17th/early 18th c Quakers to articulate their faith in more systematic terms. For Creasey, to put it simplistically some Quakers sought to ‘accommodate Protestant orthodoxy to the central tenet of Quakerism [the Inner Light]’, while others ‘accommodated Quakerism to orthodox Protestantism’. ‘Henceforth, Quakerism tended to appear to the world as a system of doctrine, whether more mystical and speculative or more evangelical and orthodox: it tended less and less to appear as revolutionary conception of the inmost meaning of the Christian gospel, finding expression in a new type of church fellowship, and a new conception of the church’s vocation.’ This led to the diverse interpretations of Quakerism associated with Gurney and Hicks and the 18th and 19th century developments deriving from these, and ‘failed to provide any adequate place for the vitally important teaching of Isaac Pennington, in whom, [for Creasey], the true genius of Quakerism finds its most fruitful expression.’

For Creasey Barclay was rightly criticised by Keith for setting up an orthodox system which nevertheless tended to undermine itself: it either reduced to what was already better said by other churches, or in effect dispensed with any need for the particular doctrines of Christianity. Keith attacked Penn on similar grounds, especially for his moralistic interpretation of evangelical righteousness. (Creasey cites HG Wood to the effect that ‘Penn tends to treat God’s action in the Incarnation as a regrettable, temporary concession to human weakness’.)

The controversy with Keith gave rise to creedal-like statements of orthodoxy by Quakers, notably by Whitehead in 1695, though Fox had already done this. As well as asserting the divine persons and the incarnation, Whitehead insisted on Christ’s glorified body and refused to set ‘outward helps’ such as scripture and preaching against the inner light; but also asserted the universal presence of Christ in the hearts of men, and that those who lived as Christians by the inner light but had no knowledge of Christ crucified were perfect Christians in practice, though ‘not in knowledge or understanding’. Whitehead issued another formal statement to a similar effect with William Mead in 1712; here, Creasey comments, ‘the universal Light of Christ’ is equated with ‘the thoroughly orthodox doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant.’ Quaker controversial writings of the same period ‘invariably’ express Quaker doctrine in ‘studiously scriptural’ and orthodox language. There is a clear tension here with the early Quaker emphasis on ‘a fresh and living rediscovery of the presence and power of the living Christ’ aside from formal doctrine. For Creasey,

Penington, to whom he now turns, found a way to avoid obscuring what was distinctive in primitive Quakerism, in contrast to ‘rationalistic and speculative’ and ‘evangelical’ authors alike.

Section 5: The teaching of Isaac Penington

Penington thirsted to ‘walk and live in God’ as the first Christians had, in contrast to ‘Religion among us’, which was ‘but a talk to what they felt, enjoyed, possessed and lived in.’ He was convinced he had experienced Christ at a Quaker general meeting (at which Fox spoke); ‘This is he, this is he, there is no other; this is he whom I have waited for and sought after from my childhood’. Penington had a vivid sense of both the ‘Power of the Lord ... the pure principle of life and light in the heart’, and a profound distrust of self: he had nothing without God’s ‘living breath’. He did not violently reject his former religious profession, but saw his conversion as ‘a clearer leading into and guidance by that principle of life’, and even wished his brother – a Roman Catholic – a ‘serious’ and not a ‘loose Papist’.

Penington was much concerned with the risk of any outward form of religion – including those of the Quakers – becoming merely external, and disassociated from the inward: ‘the fleshly part easily grows into unity with and seal for that Form which indeed is of the Flesh.’ Creasey says that for Penington ‘the only sufficient and enduring bond of unity [and guarantee of spiritual authenticity] was the experience of a common Spirit rather than the acceptance of a form of words or the copying of an ancient pattern.’ He insisted that the Quaker faith was that revealed in the scriptures, which he expressed in very orthodox language, and that they had introduced no new doctrine; but ‘concerning the doctrine of Christ, his concern, like that of the first Friends, was experimental and practical rather than speculative’.

To put his Christology in context, Creasey treats of Penington’s anthropology. There is a ‘root’ that ‘inclineth [man] to Reason and Righteousness’, but this is among those ‘reliques of the Image which the first man had’ which are powerless of themselves towards salvation. Under the law one is convicted of sin and seeks a way out, but receives ‘but the outward nature, but the external knowledge of the things of God, not the inward Substance’. Man must ‘wait on the redeeming Arm for the beginning, progress and perfecting’ of redemption, which is that state St Paul calls the result of the indwelling of the spirit of God or of Christ. Freedom of the will is not a ‘power of ourselves, but as we have been turned to God’s power and received it from him’. Perfect liberty resides in binding whatever is ‘out of the life’, not in Gnostic or Ranter licence.

The ‘Seed’ receives a fuller treatment from Penington than any other Quaker writer: ‘the term Seed was frequently employed by Friends in the 17th c, often as a synonym for the divine Light, and sometimes to denote that hidden principle in man which, when reached by the ‘inshining’ Light, began to germinate in the soul.’ Penington used the term to express his joy and release on conversion,

but it was already in his spiritual vocabulary before then. It expresses 'a deep inward, experimental acquaintance with the things of God which issues in a transformation of the whole personality, a new birth, a bearing the fruit of the Spirit' (Creasey). It is progressive, and reliant on the soul's careful discernment and obedience. Penington uses the image of two Seeds, a good and an evil, and links this with St Paul's use of the flesh and the spirit. Distinctive to Penington is the idea that a whole system of religion can grow out of the evil Seed, which is outwardly indistinguishable from that deriving from the good Seed. A notable theme in this is the pride that can arise from self-denial. The warfare between the two Seeds can be brought to a victorious conclusion even in this life, but this is an ongoing, not a static, condition; those living after the Spirit can achieve a state of perfection 'pertaining to the conscience, being so ingrafted into Christ [and the likeness of his death and resurrection] as that they feel no condemnation for sin ... and inabled to walk, not after the flesh but after the Spirit.'

Penington also speaks of two kinds of religious knowledge: one can 'know what is said of him, but not know him of whom those things are said', and 'spiritual things cannot be savingly known, but in union with them'. Related to this is his use of the two dispensations of the law and the gospel, the one figurative, the one substantial; both exist simultaneously, they are only externally represented historically: 'the Soul is changed into the same Image, and partakes of the Heavenly Glory ... and hath fellowship with the Father and the Son in the Light of Life; this is the Gospel state, and there is not another'. Those who claim to be returning the church to its primitive simplicity are just as vulnerable to a purely external religion as those who use set forms and rituals; Penington places this in an apocalyptic context, in that he believes that those who are truly in the Spirit are now growing in number to challenge those who profess, and even feel and act in a way that resembles a true change of heart, but do it all out of self. The marks of the true church are possession of authentic life and power, and not any outward form of any kind, including those of self-conscious simplicity, for Penington. He argues that scripture is only of use when read 'by experience of that whereof scripture speaks'; otherwise reverence for the book equates to that of the Pharisees for the Torah in the Gospels.

The dualities of outward and inward, flesh and spirit, law and gospel, and knowledge of the intellect and the heart are vital for understanding Penington's Christology: he distinguishes between Christ and the garment which he wore; that is, Christ as known through faith and obedience, and by the intellect. The threefold state of man - in nature, under the law and the gospel - is reflected in the three-fold divine ministry of redemption, in Christ's pre-incarnate and incarnate states, and the Spirit.

Penington's view of the Person and work of Christ

Creasey identifies several themes in Penington's Christology: the historic and eternal Christs; the relation between Christ, the Father and the Spirit; Christ as principle of creation and redemption; how salvation is accomplished; and two doctrines distinctive to Penington: the 'three-fold appearance' of

Christ (the 3-fold redemption mentioned a moment ago) and the 'prepared body' (from Hebrews 10, 'Thou hast prepared a body for me' etc).

The universal and inward work of Christ in the Spirit occupies him most. Penington considered himself Trinitarian but disliked formulas: he preferred scriptural language to express scriptural ideas. Yet: 'This I believe from my Heart, and have infallible demonstration of, for I know three and feel three in Spirit, even an eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which are but one eternal God.' He has fellowship with them 'in their life and Redeeming Power ... not desiring to know and comprehend notionally, but to feel the thing inwardly, truly, sensibly and effectually'. 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all' is a fundamental principle for Penington. He uses the terms 'Substance', 'Image' and 'Breath' for Father, Son and Spirit. Christ draws to the Father by virtue of being Image of the Father: one receives the substance by means of the image.

Light imagery is important for him. Christ is the Image of God as Light, that lights the world. He calls the Spirit a breath from the substance, that draws to the image. One shares in the divine life by 'walking in this Inspiration'. Creasey thinks this reflects the same experience found in the Johannine writings, and says Penington was psychologically unable to think in metaphysical terms about one to whom he is personally indebted, and seeking communion with. The main point, for Creasey, is that his doctrine is based on experience, though one informed by scripture. But the speculative implications are that Christ is 'that Word of Eternal Life, which was Glorified with the Father before the World was.' As the Word was the principle of Creation, so it 'is also the beginning of the Creation of God in the Heart.' By this the prophets and others through the ages were turned from darkness to light, gradually, from lowly and barely discernible beginnings, and in a costly struggle involving dying to one's own wisdom and will. 'For the Light is wholly contrary to man, as he stands in the alienation from God. It crosseth his spirit, his thoughts, his desires, his knowledge, his reason, his understanding, even all that is of himself.' So these may be more of a hindrance than a help. 'I do confess I took [the promptings of the Light] to be a natural thing, and overlooked and despised it, till the Lord opened my understanding and shewed me what it was, and how he wrought by it ... we are taught of God to distinguish, understandingly and experimentally, between nature and him from whom nature came'. In places he speaks of the work of the Law in the heart as being part of the work of Christ: it slays in order that man might then discover 'a Life in him which answered the Law'.

Penington does not neglect the role of the historic Christ: though 'a 'principle' may be received, a 'principle' cannot bestow [therefore] since Christ bestows the Seed of Life and Light upon men, Christ is more than a principle' (Creasey on P.) 'Christ is the eternal Light, Life, Wisdom, and Power of God, which was manifested in that body of flesh which he took of the Virgin ... he is the King, Priest and Prophet of his people, and saveth them from their sins by laying down his life for them, and imputing his righteousness to them, yet not without revealing and bringing forth the same righteousness in them which he wrought for them.' (P.) 'Whoever feels the Light and Life of Christ

revealed in him, and comes into union with God there through, he feels the work of Regeneration, of Sanctification, of Justification, of Life and Redemption; and so comes to reap benefit inwardly, and partake of the blessed fruits of all that Christ did outwardly.’ The outward facts about Christ are not enough, one must ‘know and own him inwardly’: in fact, anyone who ‘cometh into the Sense of God’s Spirit, and the Law thereof, and into the Denial of his own Spirit, he bears that which in substance is the Cross of Christ, which crucifieth the worldly nature and spirit.’ But he does not downplay extrinsic grace: ‘For though the Lord visit me with Life, quicken me thereby, make a change in my heart and state, yet it is in his Mercy to accept me, and to pass by for his name sake my former debts and trespasses against him’; and the very dispensation is one of free grace.

Penington deals with the point of the Incarnation using his doctrine of the three-fold appearance of Christ: ‘it is one and the same Christ that was signified in types and shadows under the Law, revealed in the fullness of time in that prepared Body, and afterwards in the Spirit.’ Creasey comments that the Old Testament figures ‘were not only fore-shadowings and pre-figurings ... [but] modes of his presence, in a hidden spiritual manner, discernible and effectual for all those whose spiritual insight penetrated beneath the outward appearance.’ Such discernment was still required to penetrate the ‘veil of his flesh’, and the Light within is required for a true - or at any rate a living - understanding of scripture. Penington sees an analogy between the Jewish leaders’ reception of Christ, and that of the religious authorities of his own day of the Quakers. For Penington, Christ’s physical incarnation reveals eternal truths about the nature of God and salvation: ‘he put forth in the Body ... the saving Virtue which he had before’, as well as sharing our infirmities. He who ‘looks on Christ without’ must also ‘feel the same within ... the power, efficacy, and virtue’ of his life and death and resurrection. Creasey denies that Penington separates Christ’s outward ‘Body’ and divine person, or thinks of the relation between them in a docetic way (that Christ is not really fully human). Rather, his arguments aim to prove that knowledge of doctrine concerning Christ is to know Christ only after the flesh, unless accompanied by the living, saving experience of him: ‘Under the forms of his doctrines of the distinction between Christ and his ‘fleshly garment’, Penington ... was calling his contemporaries to consider afresh whether, in their concentration upon the Biblical, historical and doctrinal aspects of Christian faith, they were not overlooking or minimising the vital necessity of what may be called an ‘existential’ knowledge of Christ ... and to discern his saving activity in the moral and spiritual experiences of those who’ never knew of the historic Christ. Creasey notes affinities between Penington and ‘a Christian existentialist such as Gabriel Marcel’, especially concerning the concept of ‘mystery’, and draws parallels with the Cambridge Platonism of Henry More and others, based on patristic thought and Plotinus. He cites WR Inge, a great scholar of Christian Platonism and mysticism: ‘There are Christians who believe in the divinity of Christ because they have known Him as an indwelling Divine Spirit; who believe that He rose because they have felt that He has risen; who believe that He will judge the world because He is already the judge of their own lives.’ At the same time Creasey acknowledges that aspects of Penington’s teaching, like

that of other Quakers, was open to being understood – or misunderstood – as diminishing the value of the Incarnation.

Section 6: The significance of the early Quaker Christology

Creasey proceeds to review the significance of early Quaker Christology in relation to 20th century discussion. He cites historians of doctrine such as Dorner, who offer some support to the view that ‘the Person of Christ [in 17th c scholastic discussion] stood without inner connection to us’, and that Quaker accounts at least ‘possessed the rough vigour of life rather than the cold symmetry of death’. Though Dorner also held the view that in these writings ‘The mystical union with the eternal Christ ... takes the place of justification’, even where the Incarnation is acknowledged; making it a ‘theophany without real importance.’ Schaff made a similar point in a positive way: the Quakers ‘teach the absolute universality, not indeed of salvation, but of the offer and opportunity of salvation’, and this is ‘the source of their democracy, their philanthropy, their concerned for the lowest and most neglected classes of society, their opposition to slavery, war and violence, their meekness under suffering, their calmness and serenity of temper.’ WA Curtis pointed out the way in which their interpretation pre-empted the direction in which much theological speculation has since gone.

Against Dorner, Creasey argues that the Quakers, ‘long before William Temple, perceived that the wise question is not ‘Is Christ Divine?’, but ‘What is God like?’: contemporary orthodoxy was obsessed with theories of justification and the atonement at the expense of Christ as the revelation of God and His ‘agelong labour ... for the recovery of his creation to himself’: many other Christians ‘felt no difficulty in holding [orthodox Christological beliefs] alongside a conception of God and of His relation with men which was scarcely Christianised at all.’ The Quakers, on the other hand, were committing themselves to what John Baillie called ‘the declaration that the things which Jesus stood for are the most real things, the things that matter most of all in the world’. The Quakers and their forebears among the Protestant mystics pointed towards ‘the insight ... that the relation between God and men is to be construed, not simply in metaphysical terms ... but in personal terms, and supremely in terms of love and response’. Further, ‘by insisting that the Light is the Light of *Christ*, and not simply an undefined and unspecified divine illumination, they were, surely, saying that what God showed himself to be in Jesus Christ he eternally is in relation to all men’. Creasey states the same thing from the other side, so to speak: the ‘universal and saving activity of God have been perfectly expressed and realised in history in the life of Jesus ... through his actual historic life, teaching, death and resurrection, God’s saving power has been released into the world with unprecedented fullness and effectiveness. In him ‘the Word became flesh’; he is one with ‘the light that lighteth every man’.’

Creasey also relates the denial that the inner light is just another name for conscience to HH Farmer’s idea of the ‘constitutive claim’ of God upon man, and the same author’s ‘entelechy of the

human organism' as Christ; as well as Albert Schweitzer's famous assertion of the 'Christ-mysticism' of the New Testament. This is relevant to the Quaker view both in the sense that Christ as personal is of importance (as well as a generalised divine principle), and in terms of the importance of actual experiential acquaintance. If the strength of the Quaker position for Creasey lies in its universalising of a personal Christ, the language of inner light by itself, 'unless constantly re-charged with the rich historic, personal and incarnational content of Christian faith, will continue to result, as it did in the 17th c, in misunderstanding and misinterpretation both among those who use it and those who hear it used'.

He goes on to draw out some implications of all this for ecclesiology: the church cannot be confined to any of its historical manifestations, and can't be defined 'in such ways as would altogether ignore multitudes who, even without knowing it, are living under the patient and gentle discipline of the Spirit of Christ'. However, in another way the bounds must be drawn more rigorously: 'membership in Christ's Church ultimately belongs to all those, and only those, who hear and obey his voice and show forth his Spirit.' Creasey draws on Leslie Newbiggin's 'third stream' of Christian ecclesiological tradition, the 'Pentecostal', as opposed to the first Catholic and second Protestant – that is, the church as 'that which bears the apostolic witness' and 'where the true witness is, there is the church', respectively. The third represents the 'living power of the Spirit of God', which critiques but also complements the other two in a three-cornered debate. He concludes his study by seeking to draw out the Biblical roots of the relationship between Friends' Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology in terms of this third tradition, from the Prologue to John's Gospel and Romans 8. As Creasey recognises this account has a thoroughly ecumenical character and application.

Summary prepared by Andrew Harvey (2012)