

Anne Conway and George Keith on the ‘Christ Within’

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of early Quaker theology on the philosophy of Anne Conway, as presented in her *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690). We begin by exploring Conway’s rejection of the remnants of Cartesianism in the Neoplatonic philosophy of her mentor, Henry More, leading her to posit a monistic ontology of spirit. Following this, I argue that Conway’s Christology and religious epistemology can be understood as inspired by George Keith’s account of the ‘Christ Within’ and the manner in which the historical Christ is construed as a manifestation of a metaphysical principle, ‘Christ’. We can understand Conway’s notion of ‘adoption’ by Christ as becoming qualitatively identical with Him as part of the process towards moral perfection, in which we come to embody the ‘Christ Within’.

Keywords

Anne Conway, George Keith, Henry More, Christology, inner light, Cartesianism

1. Introduction

It is well known that the philosopher Anne Conway had fully adopted Quakerism as a way of life by her death in 1679. Not only did her epitaph simply state, ‘Quaker Lady’, she brought many prominent figures, such as George Fox, Robert Barclay, and George Keith, into her intellectual circle at her residence, Ragley Hall, and employed a number of Quaker women as servants, praising them in her correspondence as a palliative against her severe health issues:

They have been and are a suffering people and are taught from the consolation [that] has been experimentally felt by them under their great trials to administer comfort upon occasion to others in great distress The weight of my affliction

lies so very heavy upon me, that it is incredible how very seldom I can endure anyone in my chamber, but I find them so still, and very serious, that the company of such of them as I have hitherto seen, will be acceptable to me. (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 421–22)¹

In her correspondence and her sole extant work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690), published posthumously, Conway reveals deep engagement with Quaker ideas current at the time. However, such engagement has not always been widely recognised: for example, Nicolson claims that the *Principles* show ‘the absence of any influence of Quakerism’, concluding on this basis that the notebooks on which the text is based were ‘laid aside before her interest in the movement began’ (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 453) and thus must have been written in the early 1670s. However, given other evidence, it appears that the *Principles* must have been written in the final years of her life, when Conway had already been immersed in discussion with key Quaker figures and the Quaker literature of the time. Despite this, Peter P. Loftson argues that the *Principles* still show no evidence of ‘specifically Quaker views’, on the basis that the *Principles* ‘is a metaphysical and theological treatise of the highest abstraction’ (1982: 8), apparently ignoring the fact that Conway herself appears to be familiar with a number of Quaker theological treatises of the time. In addition, even where potential Quaker influence upon Conway’s philosophy, as presented in the *Principles*, has been recognised, it has not always been deeply explored.² One of the aims of this paper is to help in some small way to rectify such a gap in the literature.

This paper focusses on the parallels between Conway’s thought and that of George Keith on the question of the ‘Christ Within’ and of Christ as an extended, distinct metaphysical principle. In the following section, I will explore Conway’s rejection of the dualist aspects of the ontology of her philosophical mentor, Henry More, grounded in her views regarding the implications of God’s goodness for the nature of creation. In the third section I will introduce the early theology of George Keith, with a particular focus upon his religious epistemology and Christology, before, in the fourth section, returning to Conway’s monism in the *Principles*. I will argue that the notion of the ‘Christ Within’, for Conway, provides a distinctive Christology in her philosophy, centred on the question of change and the intermingling of spirits, that draws upon the Quaker notions of the ‘Christ Within’ and the ‘inner light’. Finally, I will conclude with reflections upon future potential avenues of research regarding the interplay between Anne Conway’s philosophy and early Quaker theology, as well as the impact that Conway’s philosophy may have had upon George Keith, leading to his schism with Quakerism in the 1790s.

1 Some quotations from original sources throughout this paper have been modernised, with great care taken not to change the sense of the passage in question.

2 Exceptions to this trend in the scholarship on Conway include Hutton (2004: ch. 9) and White (2008: ch. 2), and I intend to build upon their excellent work in this paper.

2. Rejecting Henry More's Dualism

The extensive correspondence between Henry More and Anne Conway appears to have begun in 1650 at the prompting of her brother, John Finch, who had studied under More at Christ's College, Cambridge. More was immediately impressed by his new correspondent, and proceeded to discuss and debate with her some of the major strands of philosophical and theological thought of the time, including his own. In the very briefest of terms, More's own philosophy combined his reading of the Platonists with the Cartesianism prevalent at the time, bringing about his own idiosyncratic mixture of the two traditions.

Descartes presents his dualist ontology in his *Meditations* and elsewhere, arguing that there are two fundamental types of substance: mind or spirit (which has thought or thinking as its primary attribute) and body or matter (which has extension as its primary attribute) (see 1968: 150–69). The mechanical sciences, which were making great advances at the time, were taken to be concerned solely with the province of matter, whilst philosophy and theology could help us in some way to understand spiritual substances, exemplified in Descartes' use of the method of systematic doubt to demonstrate the existence of the self, as a thinking thing cannot be doubted. However, it soon became clear that this dualist ontology faces some significant difficulties: for example, in her correspondence with Descartes, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia questions how we can make sense of any kind of interaction between two entirely different kinds of substance, which would be required in any Cartesian account of bodily action tied to intention. She states:

For it seems that every determination of movement happens from the impulsion of a thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. (Descartes 1971: 661, quoted in Tollefsen 1999: 63)

In addition to the interaction problem, as Duran points out, Descartes' dualism also strikes a distinction between God and the physical universe in a manner that some theists may be uncomfortable with: given the sharp separation between spirit and matter, we may not be able to 'derive any notion of what, necessarily, God creates from Descartes' account, since there is a complete ontological break between the substance that is God and any other substance' (1989: 76). As we shall see, both More and Conway would themselves move away from strict Cartesian dualism, in different degrees, in order to avoid positing such a sharp distinction between God and His creation, which could potentially lead to a system where the role of God in creation is increasingly undermined.

Henry More, for his part, attempts to meet such worries by reconceiving the ontological status of spirit and arguing that mechanical causes alone could not be sufficient to account for the motion of all matter in the universe. Relying

upon Neoplatonic assumptions, More posits an active principle, the 'Spirit of Nature', which plays the role of a secondary immaterial cause, acting upon material substance: 'the vicarious power of God upon this great automaton, the world' (1712: 46). In order to avoid worries concerning interaction between two fundamentally different kinds of substance, More allows this principle to have extension, unlike Descartes' 'thinking thing'. In his *Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, he contrasts this Spirit of Nature with the Holy Spirit:

[It] is evident, that though the *Holy Spirit of God* and the *Spirit of Nature* be everywhere present in the world, and lie in the very same points of space; yet their actions, applications or engagings with things are very distinct. For the Spirit of Nature takes hold only of matter, remanding gross bodies towards the centre of the Earth, shaping vegetables into all that various beauty we find in them. (1660: 458)

Unlike the Holy Spirit, then, the Spirit of Nature is taken to interact directly with matter, forming creatures and governing their interactions,³ having extension but not being itself material: as Henry puts it, it is an 'immaterial, universal hylarchic principle which was invoked as a moving, ordering, and animating principle in all physical phenomena' (1990: 57). Further to this, More assigns an important theological role to the Spirit of Nature, insofar as it reveals the circumscription of divine powers in line with the moral necessities that follow from His absolute goodness. The operations of the Spirit of Nature are taken to be one effect of God's understanding of the essential nature of things and how things must be in order to achieve the best possible creation. As Henry explains,

God used intellectual powers, even before the Creation, to arrive at an understanding of certain essential features inherent in the very nature of things ... [including] moral concepts like good and evil, justice and injustice, as well as natural concepts such as the categorical distinction ... between body and soul. (1990: 63)

So, as More understands it, there would be a dead world of inert matter were it not for this active principle, which enlivens the world and makes it part of the divine providential plan, and it is simply part of the essential nature of things that there is a fundamental distinction between matter and immaterial spirit.

Despite More's attempts to remedy some of the perceived defects of Cartesianism, which went some way towards distancing him from Descartes, Conway is still dissatisfied with the aspects of Cartesian dualism that her mentor retained in his thought, including the very possibility of there being dead matter in a created universe (which More seems to leave open). Such uneasiness with More's position stems from her understanding of God and the divine attributes—more precisely, what she takes the necessary implications of the divine attributes to be for creation. At the beginning of the *Principles* she provides an apparently straightforward description of the divine attributes: 'God is spirit, light, and life, infinitely

3 See Gabbey (1990: 23–32) for an in-depth discussion of the role that the Spirit of Nature plays in More's metaphysics.

wise, good, just, strong, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, the creator and maker of all things visible and invisible' (Conway 1996: 9). Most important for our purposes here is Conway's insistence that God is 'life', alongside the usual theist attributes of all-good and creator: she argues that nature 'is not simply an organic body like a clock ... but it is a living body which has life and perception, which are much more exalted than a mere mechanism or a mechanical motion' (1996: 64). Rather than conceiving of 'dead' matter, with basic properties of extension and impenetrability, as a Cartesian would, she argues that the natural world teems with life, which should be taken as an essential attribute of matter, alongside shape: '[Shape] and life are distinct but not incompatible attributes of one and the same substance ... [They] coexist exceedingly well in one substance or body, where shape is the instrument of life, without which no vital operation could be performed' (1996: 67).

The reason for such a reconception of matter in her philosophy is grounded in Conway's belief that there is something inconceivable in the notion of God, the source of life and goodness, creating 'dead' matter.⁴ Rather, all things, in some sense, are living, even if at a given moment in time they have taken a material form. Given God's eternal being, power, and goodness, Conway describes creation as itself an eternal process, filled with an infinite number of creatures:

God is infinitely good, loving, bountiful; indeed, he is goodness and charity itself, the infinite fountain and ocean of goodness, charity, and bounty. In what way is it possible for that fountain not to flow perpetually and to send forth living waters? ... [Since] he is not able to multiply himself ... it necessarily follows that he gave being to creatures from time everlasting or from time without number, for otherwise the goodness communicated by God, which is *his essential attribute*, would indeed be finite. (1996: 13; emphasis added)

A God whose essential attribute, beyond all others, is goodness would spread this goodness, in the form of life, as widely as possible in both quantity and duration. Conway's universe is absolutely crowded with life, even though it may not appear so on the surface: she argues that 'in every creature, whether spirit or body, there is an infinity of creatures, each of which contains an infinity in itself, and so on to infinity' (1996: 17). So, unlike her mentor, More, who holds on to the Cartesian account of dead matter that can, in some way, interact with spirit, Conway entirely rejects such a notion as incompatible with the traditional theist account of God. The bountiful, all-good God, the source of all life, could not create dead matter. As we shall see, Conway underscores this view by undermining entirely any strict distinction between spirit and matter; rather, she places them on a continuum as the attributes of a single substance, 'creature', which can change with regard to these key attributes: 'Every body can change into a spirit and every spirit into a

4 Conway also believes that Scripture is on her side, arguing that 'both the Old and the New Testament ... prove in clear and certain words that everything has life and is truly alive in some degree' (1996: 62).

body because the distinction between body and spirit is only one of mode, not essence' (1996: 41). Depending on the relative perfection of a creature, they can become either more spirit or more matter, with the ideal journey towards divine perfection being understood as an infinite journey that approaches the perfect spiritual nature of God:

[All] God's creatures, which have previously fallen and degenerated from their original goodness, must be changed and restored after a certain time to a condition which is not simply as good as that in which they were created, but better [The] spirit imprisoned in such grossness or crassness is set free and becomes more spiritual. (Conway 1996: 42–43)

Thus, Conway's ontology has something of a soteriological slant, in that creatures are able to engage in a salvific transformation from body to spirit. In section 4, I will discuss how Conway's ontology of spirit, which is formulated as a reaction to the Cartesian postulation of dead matter, leads to a distinctive Christology that shows the potential influence of George Keith. We will return to the details of Conway's metaphysics in that section, after we have considered the early theology of Keith below.

3. The 'Christ Within' and the Extended Spirit

Conway's convincement in the very last years of her life is perhaps best characterised as the culmination of a long religious and intellectual journey, for which the groundwork was laid in her very early years through her correspondence with her mentor, Henry More (despite the latter's often-stated antipathy towards the Quakers⁵). In the 1870s, during the last decade of her life, one frequent visitor to Ragley Hall was the prominent Quaker George Keith.

Keith, in a similar manner to Conway, had received his philosophical education via an early introduction to Cartesianism and Henry More's neo-Platonism. According to Kirby's biography of Keith, as a young student in Aberdeen he had been taken with Cartesian claims regarding reason and intuition as a resource with which the individual, apart from any authority and tradition, can learn by themselves religious truths, which 'prepared the way for a faith which would depend not upon shibboleths and priesthood but upon the eager receptiveness of the individual' (1942: 7). Around the same time, Keith began reading the work of the Cambridge Platonists, and was particularly struck by More's *Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, which had been published in 1660. Again, it seems

5 However, More did later adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards the Quakers, due to efforts on the part of Conway to encourage dialogue through correspondence and meetings at Ragley Hall. As Hutton points out (2004: 187–88), More praises the piety to be found in some of the Quaker writings he engaged with, particularly favouring George Keith, who he believes to be the 'absolutely best Quaker of them all' (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 513).

to have been the approach to religious epistemology that Keith found agreeable in this work, in particular the notion that the righteous individual, apart from scripture and church authority, can themselves come to theological truths:

[If] the soul receives no impress from God, it discovers nothing of God. For it is most certainly true, *that like is known by like*; and therefore unless the *image of God* be in us, which is *righteousness* and *true holiness*, we know nothing of the *nature of God*, and so consequently can conclude nothing concerning him to any purpose. For we have no measure to apply to him, because we are not possessed of anything homogeneal or of a like nature with him But when we are arrived to that righteousness or rectitude of spirit or uprightness of mind, by this, as by the geometrical quadrature, we also comprehend with all saints what is that spiritual breadth and length and depth and height, as the apostle speaks. What the rectitude of an angle does in mathematical measurings, the same will this uprightness of Spirit do in theological conclusions. (1660: 403)⁶

In this way, More places emphasis upon the dogma of humankind as created in the image of God, arguing that one of its implications is that all human beings, apart from contingent circumstances in which they may be placed, have the ability to achieve righteousness and thereby genuine wisdom concerning God and other theological matters. Indeed, if the individual is truly righteous, such knowledge will attain similar status as that of mathematical knowledge, which, given the Cartesianism of the time, was often taken as the standard of infallible, foundational knowledge.⁷

Following his conviction, Keith decided to begin writing his own works of Quaker theology, in addition to the usual apologetic pamphlets, in response to the sect's many vociferous critics. Two of the most important works of this early period, written just prior to Keith's first meeting with Conway, are *Immediate Revelation* (first published in 1668) and *The Way to the City of God Described* (written during Keith's imprisonment from 1667 to 1668, but not published until 1678). An important question that Keith, among many other Quaker writers of the period, feels required to answer in these works is that of the necessity of belief in this historical Christ. Such an account is felt to be required owing to the epistemological considerations, deriving from Descartes and More, that underlie Keith's understanding of faith and righteousness. More's religious epistemology,

6 In addition, Keith seems to have been impressed by More's notion of the Spirit of Nature, which we have already had occasion to discuss. In a letter from 1674, following a visit from Keith, More states of him that, 'He is very philosophically and Platonically given, and is pleased with the notion of the Spirit of Nature' (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 392–93).

7 In a similar manner, More holds his doctrine of the Spirit of Nature to be self-evident, with the certainty of mathematics, in the light of reason: 'the principle we speak of is neither obscure nor unreasonable; nor so much introduced by me, as forced upon me by inevitable evidence of reason', and to doubt it would be 'as ridiculous, as to doubt of the truth of any one plain and easy demonstration in the first Book of Euclid' (1712: 205–06).

centred on the notion of a righteous individual being possessed of theological truths, naturally lends itself, for Keith, to traditional Quaker imagery concerning 'the inner light' or 'the light within'. By the time that Keith came to write his first treatises, the inner light had long been associated with the figure of Christ, the 'Christ Within'. As Moore states, such an association can be primarily traced back to George Fox, who holds that the believer can be mystically united with Christ, although his use of such phrases as 'the light of Christ' perhaps lacks some precision:

Fox was mainly concerned with the unity between Christ and the believer When he spoke of the 'light', sometimes he used the phrase as equivalent to Christ and sometimes he meant the way Christ made himself known 'The light' was an overwhelming invasive force, not a vague mental illumination. (2000: 81)

Given Keith's immersion in both Quakerism and More's Platonism, it is natural for him to also associate Christ with the kind of individual revelation proposed by More.

However, if the 'Christ Within' allows growth both morally and intellectually, what role is left for the historical Christ? Robert Gordon, one of the most vociferous critics of Quakerism at the time, argues that a focus upon redemption through the 'Christ Within' inevitably leads to a heretical undermining of the importance of redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Christ: addressing George Keith in print, he writes:

I take notice of thy slighting that great work of man's redemption as already purchased by Christ for sinners, by that one sacrifice of his crucified body once offered for sins Speaking first of a redemption wrought in us by the Spirit, as if that were the cause and foundation thereof. (1671: 7–8)

To remain within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, Gordon argues, one must emphasise the primacy of salvation through the historical Christ, and the Quaker notion of the 'Christ Within' provides an unfortunate temptation to depart from this essential part of the Christian tradition. More, for his part, also attacks the notion of 'Christ Within' in his *Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*, claiming that it implied either that believers unified with Christ are themselves divine or that Christ is not divine:

[A] subversion of the Christian religion ... that fanatical piece of magnificency of some enthusiasts, who would make *their union with God the same with that of Christ's*. For then were they truly God, and divine adoration would belong to them; or if not, it is a sign that they are not God, and that therefore Christ is not. (1660: 14)

Given such attacks, and the desire on the part of Keith to stress Quakerism's compatibility with Christian orthodoxy, he feels it incumbent upon him to offer a theology that accords a substantial role to the historical Christ.

As Hutton explains (see 2004: 189–99), Keith is preoccupied throughout the 1870s with questions of Christology, and one of his major theological innovations

at this time is the notion of Christ as an extended soul throughout the universe, with two manifestations, as Logos and as the Incarnated Christ. As such, the 'Christ Within', which as Logos illuminates the believer with religious insight, is merely one side of the coin of the historical Christ. The notion of Christ as an extended soul is introduced in *Immediate Revelation* in the context of a discussion regarding the Logos as immediately present in all beings in the created universe:

God made ... this whole fabric of the creation by his Word, his immediate Word; and he upholds all things thereby He had no other means but the word of his Mouth, the word of his eternal power, which was in the beginning, whereby all things are made, and without it was nothing made [The] Word worketh in all things immediately which God ever made, means are but ciphers without this, means operate but mediately, but the Word immediately; and this Word is Christ. (1668: 56)

In this manner, Keith conceived of Christ as an immediately present principle within the created universe, extending throughout all things. The historical Christ is the pre-eminent manifestation of this principle, alongside the feeling of the Word working within the individual. Elsewhere, in his correspondence, Keith argues that this connection between the historical Christ and the inner light, which is available in principle to followers of other religions, could encourage conversion to the Gospel message:

If the Jews can be led to believe that they are divinely illuminated through God by virtue of those human-like rays flowing from the Great Man [i.e. Logos] ... then they may love that divine illumination and obey the same. And in this way they may feel Christ, that is, the divine soul live and move in them. (Letter to von Rosenroth, November 1675, quoted in Hutton 2004: 192)

In this manner, Keith sought to place the historical Christ in the centre of Quaker theology, alongside the familiar notion of the 'Christ Within', in that Jesus of Nazareth was simply a manifestation of the very principle through which believers are granted the kind of insight characterised as the 'inner light'.⁸

In a letter to Henry More from November 1765, Conway evinces great interest in Keith's Christology, and indeed defends it, on the basis that it emphasises the external Christ in a manner that is lacking in the Familists, another sect from the time that also spoke of the inner light: 'I am sure this new notion of G. Keith's about Christ seems far removed from Familisme, he attributing by that more to the external Person of our Saviour, that I think any ever hath done' (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 408). Indeed, this Christology may even have Scriptural and Kabbalist authority: '[His] opinion, if true, would facilitate the understanding of

8 More is seemingly unconvinced by Keith's developing Christology, writing a manuscript in 1875/6 entitled 'Examination or Confutation of G. K.'s opinion touching the extension of the soul of Christ' (see the reference to the manuscript at Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 417), which unfortunately has not survived.

many places in Scripture, as well as it would make better sense of the Kabbalists' (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 408). Though Conway, she states, awaits her mentor's opinion on the matter, Keith's Christology has clearly impressed her, and this is noteworthy, as this letter falls just before the period in which we presume the notes that would make up the *Principles* were taken down. The question, in the following section, is the way Keith's theology may have had an impact upon the philosophical system we find in that text, particularly in regard to the place that Christ has in her system.

4. Monism and Christ in the *Principles*

In the *Principles* Conway offers a monist metaphysical system of three fundamental essences: God, Christ, and Creature.⁹ God is presented both as immediately present in all of creation and as using a mediator, Christ, which is 'generated', rather than created. The necessity of this intermediate essence is due to the radical difference between God and His creatures:

[God] is immediately present in all things and immediately fills all things. In fact, he works immediately in everything in his own way. But this must be understood in respect to that union and communication which creatures have with God so that although God works immediately in everything, yet he nevertheless uses this same mediator as an instrument through which he works together with creatures, since that instrument is by its own nature closer to them. (Conway 1996: 25)

However, despite a trichotomy of essences, Conway argues that there is only one kind of substance: 'This creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence ... so that it only varies according to its modes of existence' (1996: 41). As such, there are, in Conway's ontology, three types of being—God, Christ, and Creature—all of which are one fundamental type of substance.

In fact, all things are fundamentally spirit for Conway. All that allows us to distinguish between the different kinds of being (God, Christ, and Creature) is the kind of change that they can undergo. As is common in philosophical reflection upon divine immutability, Conway states that God is already perfect, cannot become less or more perfect, and so cannot undergo change: '[There] is no greater being than God, and he cannot improve or be made better in any way, much less decrease, which would imply his imperfection. Therefore it is clear that God, or the highest being, is wholly unchangeable' (1996: 24). Christ can change, but only towards perfection, whilst Creature can change both towards and away from perfection: 'The creatures could not be equal to Christ nor of the same nature because his nature could never degenerate like theirs and change from good into bad. For this reason they have a far inferior nature in comparison to the first born'

⁹ I offer a more in-depth discussion of Conway's metaphysics, in particular of her account of God, Christ, creature and how we can distinguish between them, in a recent paper (Head 2017).

(1996: 22). Owing to this, Conway posits two different kinds of change, or, more specifically, two different kinds of power that a being has to bring about change in themselves: 'One has the intrinsic power of changing itself either for good or bad, and this common to all creatures, but not the first born of all creatures. The other kind of change is the power of moving only from one good to another' (1996: 24).

The journey towards perfection is characterised by Conway as becoming more spirit, approaching God on an infinite path that can never be completed:

No creature can become more and more a body to infinity, although it can become more and more a spirit to infinity [A] body is always able to become more and more spiritual to infinity since God, who is the first and highest spirit, is infinite and does not and cannot partake of the least corporeality. (Conway 1996: 42)

Conway does retain matter in her metaphysical system, but it is understood negatively as being less spirit, and hence falling away from perfection. As such, spirit is conceived of by Conway as the fundamental substance of all things, stemming from the infinite spirit, God, and as something that can become increasingly corporeal or gross as the being in question moves away from divine perfection. Further to this, as we have seen, all creatures, regardless of where they stand on the continuum between infinitely perfect spirit and gross matter, contain within them an intermingling, infinite number of spirits, themselves on their own infinite journey to perfection. Conway takes it as an implication of God's overwhelming goodness that He would wish to share this goodness to the greatest extent possible, with the effect of an everlasting, ongoing creation involving an infinite number of creatures.

Let us now consider the notion of the inner light and the 'Christ Within' in the context of Conway's philosophy, for there is a sense in which Christ is present in all human beings in a manner which has interesting soteriological consequences. We must first recall that, for Conway, Christ is extended throughout the universe, and thus, in the manner in which creatures intermingle with each other, Christ must also intermingle with all creatures in an analogous way. Of course, the distinguishing feature of Christ is that this substance can only move toward perfection, whilst creatures are able to move both away and towards perfection, glossed as becoming more or less spiritual. However, an important question is how we distinguish Christ and creature at the moment that the latter, at some point in their infinite journey towards God, has joined with the spiritual level of Christ, and moves together with the intermediary towards perfect spirituality. At that moment in time there will be nothing to distinguish them in terms of change and level of spirituality, and thus, although one would not have become numerically identical with Christ at this point, we nevertheless will have become qualitatively identical with the intermediary. Conway seeks to strike a balance between joining with Christ on the path to perfection whilst maintaining the necessary distance between these two fundamentally different types of being: '[Creatures] can never strictly speaking become him, just as he can never become

the Father. Moreover, the highest point they can reach is this, to be like him, as Scripture says. Consequently, inasmuch as we are only creatures, our relation to him is only one of adoption' (1996: 22).

I suggest that it is through the notion of 'adoption', which has no obvious theological forebears, that Conway is attempting to capture the manner in which creatures are able to become at one with Christ in one sense, and thus have the 'Christ Within', whilst nevertheless maintaining an ontological distance between creature and Christ. As we grow towards perfection, with Christ intermingled with us, also changing towards perfection, we in a sense are 'adopted' by Christ, becoming a child of Christ in analogy with the relation between God the Father and Christ. We cannot *become* Christ, but we can *be at one with Him*.

We must also note that, for Conway, a growth in perfection entails a growth in wisdom or knowledge concerning God. She speaks of the 'more excellent attributes' attained by the being who developed in such a manner: '[They] are the following: spirit or life and light, by which I mean the capacity for every kind of feeling, perception, or knowledge, even love, all power and virtue, joy and fruition, which the noblest creatures have or can have' (1996: 66). As such, we have clear parallels with the early Quaker notion of the 'Christ Within' bound up with the inner light. In the same manner in which the inner light, construed as the 'Christ Within', brings a growth of theological wisdom, correlated with the moral development of the individual, Conway's process of becoming more spiritual, having joined with the change towards perfection with Christ, brings us closer to God and to the kind of eschatological realisation where we may be able to 'see' the face of God. Unfortunately, the details of Conway's religious epistemology are somewhat sketchy in the *Principles*, so it is difficult to expand upon this thought further. However, it is noteworthy that Conway links the Quaker way of life with a growth in religious knowledge, as White points out:

Conway recognized among the Friends a type of profound faith that was not mere common intellectual assent to propositional truths; in their lives, she grasped and appreciated a modality or a way of being in the world, namely, a full (embodied) commitment to illuminating goodness that confronted one, awakening one to transformative action in the world. (2008: 30)

Conway sees, in the example of the Quakers around her, the manner in which a way of being connects ineluctably with a deepening faith, grounded in the influence of the 'Christ Within' or the 'inner light': as she states in a letter to Henry More from 1676,

[The] particular acquaintance with such living examples of great patience under sundry heavy exercises ... I find begets a more lively faith and uninterrupted desire of approaching to such a behaviour in like exigencies, than the most learned and rhetorical discourses of resignation can do. (Nicolson and Hutton 1992: 422)

Finally, it is worth returning to the question of the historical Christ, this time in the context of Conway's philosophy. Conway seems to follow Keith in positing

the historical Christ as a manifestation of a metaphysical principle, here designated as 'Christ', a kind of being that can change only towards the good: 'Jesus Christ signifies the whole Christ, who is God and man. As God, he is called *logos ousios*, or the essential word of the father. As man, he is the *logos proforikos*, or the word which is uttered and revealed, the perfect and substantial image of God's word' (1996: 21). However, although there may be a substantial sense in which Christ, as an extended substance, plays a direct soteriological role in creation, and the historical Christ can be recognised as a manifestation of this principle, this is some way removed from traditional Christian notions of the importance of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. There is seemingly little role in the system presented in the *Principles* for the Incarnation, the Gospel message, the Resurrection, and so forth—all key Christian doctrines associated with a specific historical figure. For one thing, Conway claims that soteriological development occurs as a result of the imperfections of creation, which inevitably brings about pain and suffering that ultimately has a palliative effect:

Just as all the punishments inflicted by God on his creatures are in proportion to their sins, so they tend, even to the worst, to their good and to their restoration and they are so medicinal as to cure these sickly creatures and restore them to a better condition than they previously enjoyed. (1996: 38)

In this manner, redemption becomes akin to a naturally occurring process, in which inevitable suffering leads to overall progress towards the good for all things: '[Nature] always works toward the greater perfection of subtlety and spirituality since this is the most natural property of every operation and notion. For all motion wears away and divides a thing and thus makes it subtle and spiritual' (Conway 1996: 61). There is no space for a definitive Christ-event that has a fundamental soteriological impact upon all human beings:¹⁰ in an infinite creation, an infinite number of beings have always been and always will be on an infinite journey towards spiritual perfection, and events concerning the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth seemingly have no essential impact on this process, even if the historical Christ is taken as a manifestation of the metaphysical principle, Christ.

Such a position will not surprise us when we consider: 1) her approach to the Trinity, another distinctive Christian doctrine, and 2) her universalising agenda, which she shares with her friend Mercurius van Helmont, another frequent visitor to Ragley Hall during the 1770s.¹¹ In the *Principles* Conway seems happy to undertake a fundamental reconception of the Trinity, away from traditional understandings of the doctrine: in a recent paper (Head 2017), I argue that Conway presents us with a Trinitarian theology that contains aspects of both

¹⁰ Also note how salvation is opened up to all creatures, who can join in with the overall progress towards the good, in contrast to the traditional Christian picture in which redemption is confined to human beings.

¹¹ I discuss both of these aspects of Conway's philosophy in more detail in two recent papers (Head 2015 and 2017).

subordinationism and modalism, which have been held, since the early Church, as unacceptable from a strictly orthodox perspective. At points in the *Principles* Christ is apparently given the subordinate role as an ontological middle ground between God and creation, whilst, elsewhere, Christ is equated with God's wisdom, which certainly appears a clear-cut case of modalism. Given Conway's openness to reshaping the Trinity in such a manner, it is not surprising that she would also be willing to jettison any substantial role for the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, which is another departure from strict Christian orthodoxy. Such an approach is consonant with her universalising agenda, in which she seeks to bring together all believers into the same fold, which may not necessarily involve all of the aspects of traditional Christian orthodoxy, including the Trinity and doctrine of atonement. In addition, she uses Kabbalist theology in order to emphasise the similarities that already exist between religious traditions: so, for example, she claims that the Kabbalist notion of 'Adam Kadmon' should be identified with the 'Son of God' preached by Christianity:

[The] first born of all creatures, whom we Christians call Jesus Christ The ancient Kabbalists have written many things about this ... whom they call in their writings the celestial Adam, or the first man Adam Kadmon, the great priest, the husband or betrothed of the church, or as Philo Judaeus called him, the first-born son of God. (1996: 23)

It is here, also, that we potentially come to a point where George Keith, in turn, is influenced by Anne Conway. As is well known, Keith would eventually come into conflict with established Quakers, largely because of the growing role he accords to the historical figure of Jesus in his theology. After Keith moved to Philadelphia in 1689 he increasingly complained of the focus on the inner light in the Quaker community there, at the expense of the historical Christ. Though it lies far beyond the scope of this paper to examine Keith's schism with Quakerism,¹² it is entirely possible that, in reflecting upon Conway's ideas, which incorporated in at least some sense his notion of the 'Christ Within', he was able to see the manner in which his own theology naturally leads away from a substantial soteriological role for the historical Jesus. As such, it may be that his time at Ragle Hall, conversing with Conway and others, laid some of the foundations for the schism in Philadelphia, around 15 years later. It is unlikely that his interactions with Conway were the primary motivating factor in his break from Quakerism (it is more likely that there were a multitude of interconnecting factors¹³), but it is possible that they nevertheless had an impact upon his developing views. If

12 An in-depth narrative of the events leading to, and following from, the Keithian schism can be found in Cody (1972).

13 As noted by an anonymous reviewer, the beginnings of Keith's schism can already be seen through an emphasis on the historical Christ in his correspondence with Knorr von Rosenroth, dating from the mid-1770s, at the same time as responding to many critiques of Quakerism on this question. I am grateful to the reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

Conway, taking in part her cue from early Quaker theology, is only too happy to leave behind any such Christology, there may be something worrying for the Quaker who wishes to preserve at least some aspect of this traditional Christian approach, which Keith certainly intends: in a work from 1692 he complains of the Quaker community that 'they exclude the man Christ Jesus from having any part in our salvation, placing it wholly and only upon the light within' (1692: 2). So, while it is most likely that a large number of factors led to Keith's break with Quakerism, it is possible that viewing some aspects of his theology through the prism of Conway's system as presented in the *Principles* helped to reveal for him the difficulty that he would have in incorporating a substantial role for the historical Christ in his thought. Needless to say, such a suggestion is rather speculative for now, but could offer an interesting future avenue of research in this area.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the influence of George Keith can be discerned in the manner in which Conway's philosophy reacts to Cartesianism and the thought of her mentor, Henry More. Conway is distinctly uncomfortable with the notion of an all-good, all-powerful God creating dead matter, and thus desires to avoid such a notion in her metaphysics, which necessitates her moving beyond More's invocation of a 'spirit of nature' that can enliven matter. George Keith also constructs his theology in reaction to his early reading of More: positively, in relation to his adoption of the inner light and its connection with the familiar early Quaker tradition of the 'Christ Within'; and negatively, with regard to the requirement he feels, in the face of More's criticism, to incorporate a substantial role for the historical Christ in his theology. I have argued that Conway's system involves a Christology and a religious epistemology that reveal the influence of George Keith's early theology, and explored the sense in which a being may become at one with Christ, hence embodying the 'Christ Within', on their soteriological, infinite journey to greater spirituality.

From a more general viewpoint, we can see that Anne Conway's philosophy perhaps reveals a deeper impact of early Quaker theology than has been hitherto recognised. Indeed, we may need to reconceive Conway's place in history, insofar as we could potentially regard her as an early Quaker theologian, like George Keith, in addition to her well-known label as a rationalist metaphysician of the late seventeenth century. We have also had cause to question whether Conway may have, in turn, had an impact upon the theology of Keith, potentially helping to lead to his separation from Quakerism later in his life. Certainly, it is to be hoped that further research will be undertaken on the interconnections between Conway's philosophy and Quaker thought of the time: such work could serve as mutually illuminating for scholars of both Conway and early Quaker theology, as well as opening up interactions between philosophy and theology in this area.

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