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Christ in Anne Conway's *Principia* (1690): Metaphysics, Syncretism, and Female *Imitatio Christi*

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Abstract: This article examines the representation and function of Christ in Anne Conway's only treatise, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, published posthumously in 1690. Christ plays a prominent role in Conway's philosophical system as he is both a medium between God and the creatures in the ontological hierarchy, and the instrument that will make possible the conversion of Jews and Muslims to the Christian religion. Conway draws upon Quakerism and the Lurianic Kabbalah to build a Christocentric metaphysics that also aims to make sense of pain – Conway's own physical pain as well as the existence of evil in the world. Finally, the article enquires into Conway's personal relationship with Christ. As a suffering woman, she might be expected to feel a closer connection with the human Christ, following the example of medieval female mystics, but Conway's philosophy actually presents a metaphysical, genderless Christ, which can paradoxically be interpreted as a way of reintroducing women into Christianity.

Keywords: Anne Conway, Christ, Quakerism, Lurianic Kabbalah, alchemy, Millenarianism

O thy crys god will answer if thou keepest but the lambs word of patience! and thou will be pateient, if thou watch unto the light of Jesus, give not way to the roavings and wandrings of thy mind, and This blessed inward yoak, burden, and cross has been my preservation, with thousands. I cannot but admire it, speake honourably of it, and earnestly recommend it, as that which leads back to innocency by redeeming the soul from evill, and strengthening it against temptation. This is more noble then crosses of silver or gold, or dead religions: this inwardly slays and mortefys, and brings into the fellowship of the mistery of the death and resurrection of Christ and his assencion too, into the heavenly place: for children of the resurrection, live in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.¹

¹ *The Conway Letters*, ed. Marjorie Nicolson, revised edition by Sarah Hutton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 403.

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In this letter of 8 August 1675, the Quaker William Penn tried to bring consolation to Anne Conway and to make sense of the physical pain she experienced throughout her life, by showing that suffering manifests the “light of Christ” in her conscience and that enduring pain, or carrying her “blessed cross” as Christ carried his, is a redemptory process, and therefore a sign of election or a promise of salvation.² It seems that Penn’s words were more comforting to Conway than the calls to patience of her life-long correspondent and mentor, Henry More, as she converted to Quakerism at about the time Penn wrote this letter, despite the strong objections of the Cambridge Platonist and of her husband, the second Viscount Conway.

Born into the politically influential Finch family (her father was MP and Speaker of the House of Commons in the 1620s, and her elder brother became Lord Chancellor in 1673), Anne Finch started studying Descartes’ philosophy in the 1650s, under the patronage of Henry More, to whom she had been introduced by her brother John Finch, then a student at Cambridge. Her intellectual pursuits were further encouraged by her marrying in 1651 into the Conway family, who possessed a rich private library, and whose residence at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire, became a major centre for philosophical and theological discussions led by Conway herself, despite the debilitating headaches she suffered from since she was a child, and which none of the prestigious physicians she consulted managed to cure.³

In the 1670s, Conway, More, the Quaker George Keith, and the physician Francis Mercury van Helmont, who arrived at Ragley in 1670 and stayed until Conway’s death in 1679, vividly discussed theological issues, such as interpretations of the Apocalypse. They also contributed to the revival of the Lurianic Kabbalah, a project of the German Hebraist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, who had endeavoured to translate kabbalistic texts into Latin and to publish them along with commentaries by contemporary authors. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Conway’s only treatise, written probably at the end of the 1670s, should draw upon kabbalistic literature, Quaker theology and Neoplatonism to build a philosophical system that primarily aims to define the relations between God and his creatures.⁴ Conway’s text – which she probably did not intend for publication – was first published in 1690 by van Helmont in a Latin translation

² For clarity’s sake, the masculine pronoun is here used to refer to Christ, even though this article argues that Conway’s Christ is genderless.

³ For Anne Conway’s biography, see Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway. A Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴ There is no explicit reference to Quakerism in Conway’s treatise, but this article will attempt to demonstrate that Conway did use Quaker theology in building her own conception of Christ.

in Amsterdam, then an English version appeared in London in 1692, which was actually a translation from the Latin as the original English manuscript was no longer extant by then. There is little doubt that van Helmont edited the text, divided it into nine chapters, and added references to the two volumes of *Kabbala denudata*, the result of the collaborative work on the Lurianic Kabbalah led by Rosenroth.⁵

In this article I would like to examine the conception and the function of Christ in Conway's *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*,⁶ a treatise whose main goals are to account for the existence of evil and pain, and to bring about the conversion of the Jews that would make possible the Millennial reign of Christ. I will first focus on the metaphysical role of Christ as "medium" or mediator in the ontological hierarchy presented in *The Principles*. I will then show that the recognition of this metaphysical role of Christ is precisely what will effect the unity of religions, according to Conway. Finally, I will argue that Conway's text calls for a reassessment of the relationship between women and Christ in the early modern period, as well as for a new focus on seventeenth-century Christology.⁷ This article will indeed enquire into the legacy of medieval female mystics' Christology to Conway's own conception of Christ: given that she was a suffering woman, for whom Christ was both the instrument of the union of religions and the omnipresent "light within," one might expect to find in Conway's theology overtones of medieval female mysticism. I will show that similarities can admittedly be found between late medieval Christocentric views and Conway's conception of Christ – an important one is that they all elaborated theologies that were inclusive of women. But while medieval mystics insisted on the humanity of the suffering Christ, Conway described an ungendered metaphysical Christ present in every creature.

5 The two volumes of *Kabbala denudata* were published at Sulzbach in 1677 and at Frankfurt am Main in 1684.

6 The 1692 English edition will be used in this essay. See Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Peter Loptson (Delmar, New York: Scolars' Facimiles and Reprints, 1982) – this edition gives both the English and the Latin versions. For a modern English translation, see Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (1690), eds. Taylor Corse & Allison Coudert, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

7 See Mark W. Elliott, "Christology in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 297–314. Elliott argues that the seventeenth century has been omitted from treatments of Christology because it is assumed that Reformation theologies were mere "variations on themes established in the late Middle Ages," 297.

1 Christ as medium in the ontological hierarchy

In Conway's philosophy, Christ is first presented as a "medium" [*medium* in the Latin version] in the order of nature. She explains that there are three species: at one end of the chain of beings, one finds God, who has a certain number of communicable and incommunicable attributes – and among the latter, immutability –, and at the other end, one finds creatures, who are wholly changeable and who can move towards either good or evil. Conway explains that if there existed these two species only, there would be "a Chasm, or gap" between the two, therefore the existence of a third species, or middle being, is required.⁸ Conway insists on the impossibility of there being a "chasm" in nature: she thus excludes both the notion of a vacuum, a subject that she had studied at length with More in their correspondence in the 1650s, and the identification of God with his creatures that necessarily ensues from the existence of a chasm.⁹ With the notion of a middle being, Conway is also trying to avoid allegations of pantheism, which could easily be made against her philosophy, especially as she upheld the doctrine of emanation, arguing that Christ emanated from God, and the creatures from Christ. Conway was well aware that her emanationist system was likely to raise objections. This is probably why, in the last chapter of her treatise, she insists that her system is very different from that of Spinoza, who "confounds God and the Creatures together, and makes but one Being of both."¹⁰

Thus, the function of the middle being is both to separate *and* join God and the creatures, preventing a conflation of the two while ensuring continuity of substance. As such, this medium shares attributes with both God and man. Conway describes him as *logos ousios*, "the Essential Word of the Father," or God, and *logos proforikos*, "the Word expressed or brought forth," or Man, the "vehicle" of God.¹¹ He is changeable like creatures, but contrary to them, he can move only towards greater good, which makes him closer to God. Yet Christ is not the only medium in the order of nature, showing that Conway's philosophy is primarily a philosophy of mediation. She argues indeed that there is an infinity of "middle bodies" which act as mediators between "spiritual bodies" and "gross bodies." These "middle bodies" can also be called "middle spirits" since there is only one substance in Conway's philosophy – defined as spirit – which can be more or less subtle; in its less subtle or "grosser" form, spirit is

⁸ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter V, Section 3, 169 and 170.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, Section 4, 206–207.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter IX, Section 3, 222.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter IV, Section 2, 165.

sometimes called “body,” although it is not dead matter: “Spirit and Body are originally of one Nature and Substance, and [...] a Body is nothing but a fixed and condensed Spirit, and a Spirit nothing but a subtle and volatile Body.”¹² There is therefore a continuum of substance, at both ends of which are found spirit and body (which is nothing but a form of spirit). “Middle bodies” are needed to join these two extremes:

[...] the most subtle and spiritual Body may be united with a Body that is very gross and thick, sc. by means of certain Bodies, partaking of subtilty and grossness, according to divers degrees, consisting between two Extrems, and these middle Bodies are indeed the Links and Chains by which the Soul, which is so subtle and Spiritual, is conjoined with a Body so gross; which middle Spirits (if they cease or are absent) the Union is broken or dissolved [...].¹³

Great care is taken by Conway to ensure the continuity of substance and the link between species and creatures. The role of mediators or middle bodies is to avoid gaps between extremes, and therefore to guarantee universal sympathy and union. In Conway's philosophy, the principles of plenitude and universal harmony, expressed in this passage, are indeed essential, and reveal the “unified cosmic vision”¹⁴ that she shared with many of her contemporaries.

2 Christ as the instrument of the unity of religions

Conway argues that recognition of the metaphysical role of Christ as medium in the order of nature is precisely what will effect the unity of religions and the conversion of Jews and Muslims. This is clearly stated in chapter VI of *The Principles*:

Which Things, if duly considered, may not a little conduce to the propagation and furthering of the true Faith, and Christian Religion, among the *Jews*, as well as *Turks*, and other Infidel Nations, that is to say, if it appears we are able to prove that there is a mediator between God and Man; yea, between God and all Creatures, by as solid Reasons

¹² *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII, Section 5, 217.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII, Section 3, 214. On those “middle bodies” that ensure the union of all creatures, see also *Ibid.*, Chapter III, Section 1, 164: “[...] all Creatures from the highest to the lowest are inseparably united one with another, by means of Subtiler Parts interceding or coming in between, which are Emanations of one Creature into another [...].”

¹⁴ Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 205.

as those are, which prove God to be a Creator: And so they that believe on that, may be said truly to believe on Christ Jesus, though they should not as yet have known, or been convicted, that he came in the Flesh: For if they yield to the former, they will undoubtedly be forced (if ingenious) whether they will or no, to grant the latter.¹⁵

This excerpt is particularly significant on three accounts. First, it reveals Conway's intention in writing her text and expounding her own philosophical system, namely to give arguments that will make the conversion of Jews and Muslims to the Christian religion inevitable. Most members of the Conway circle in the 1670s shared messianic expectations; they believed that the Second Coming of Christ, and therefore the Millennium, were imminent, but they required the conversion of Jews to the Christian faith. This preoccupation led to long exegeses of *The Book of Daniel* and *The Revelations of Saint John* to determine exactly where and when the Second Coming of Christ would occur.¹⁶ In *Seder Olam* (1694), for example, a treatise that presents many similarities with *The Principles*, van Helmont calculated 1777 to be the year of Christ's Second Coming, and argued that the conversion of the Jews should therefore start in the year 1702.¹⁷ The conversion of "infidel nations" was a constant preoccupation of the Conway circle, and of Conway herself, in the 1670s.

Second and most importantly, the excerpt quoted above shows the nature of Conway's ecumenism: she wished to have non-Christians realise that the Christian religion was the only true religion, meaning that she was not so much looking for a unity of religions as for a submission (more than a conversion *per se*) of non-Christians to Christianity. She contends that if Jews and Muslims accept the metaphysical role of Christ as medium, their conversion is inevitable because, by agreeing on this one principle, they have no choice but to comply ("be forced [...] whether they will or no") with the whole Christian religion. She makes it clear that *reason* (and not belief, faith or conscience) is what will lead them to adopt the Christian religion.

This is precisely the third meaningful aspect of this excerpt: the idea that Conway is trying to convert Jews and Muslims on a *metaphysical* basis, not on a religious or theological one. Admittedly, she knows that non-Christians will not be made to believe that Christ is the Messiah, but they can be made to *deduce* it

¹⁵ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter VI, Section 5, 179–180.

¹⁶ On messianism in the seventeenth century, see for example Matt D. Goldish and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture* (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), vol. 1; also Richard H. Popkin, "Jewish-Christian Relations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Conception of the Messiah," *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 163–177.

¹⁷ Francis van Helmont, *Seder Olam* (London, 1694), 53.

from another aspect or principle that seems reasonable to them. This interpretation of Conway's ecumenism contradicts, or at least qualifies, that of Christia Mercer, who states: "Conway is not so much concerned to convert non-Christians to Christian orthodoxy as to engage thoughtful people of all faiths in the metaphysical idea that there is a second substance that mediates between God and creatures."¹⁸ Mercer seems to imply that recognition of the mediating role of Christ as he is presented in *The Principles* is the aim of Conway's philosophy, while I argue that it is actually but a means to reach the conversion of all to the Christian faith.

Conway's claim that the Jews could be made to recognize and accept the role of Christ as medium in the order of nature found justification in the analogy between Christ and Adam Kadmon, the primordial man in the Lurianic Kabbalah, who also acts as mediator between God and the creatures. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, all souls were created at the same time and contained in Adam Kadmon when he fell, a doctrine that was meant to account for pain, all men having to suffer because they participated in Adam Kadmon's sin.¹⁹ Similarly, "all Things are said to consist or have their Existence" in Christ, according to Conway, because he is the First Begotten Son of God.²⁰ The analogy between Christ and Adam Kadmon is made explicit in chapter V of *The Principles* (a chapter entirely devoted to Christ):

By the Son of God, the First Begotten of all Creatures, whom we Christians do call by the name of Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures, as is above declared, not only is meant his Divinity, but also his Humanity, in Eternal Union with the Divinity [...]. Of whom the Ancient Cabbalists have delivered many things, viz. concerning the Son of God, how he was created, and of his Existence in the Order of Nature, before all Creatures; also that all receive Benediction and Sanctification in him, and by him, whom also in their Writings they call the Heavenly *Adam*, *Adam Kadmon*, or First Man, the Great Priest, Husband, or Spouse of the Church, as *Philo Judaeus* calls the First Begotten Son of God.²¹

This analogy was developed by van Helmont in a treatise appended to the second volume of *Kabbala denudata* (1684), entitled *Adumbratio kabbalae*

18 Christia Mercer, "Knowledge and Suffering in Early Modern Philosophy: G. W. Leibniz and Anne Conway," in *Emotional Minds. The Passions and the Limits of Pure Inquiry in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 186.

19 See Allison Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century. The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1999), 127.

20 Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter IV, Section 3, 166.

21 *Ibid.*, Chapter V, Section 1, 167. The analogy between Christ and Adam Kadmon is also made in the annotations to chapter I of *The Principles* (150–151), but these notes were most probably added by van Helmont, and are not clearly related to the content of chapter I.

christianae, which stages a dialogue between a kabbalist and a Christian philosopher. Chapter III of the treatise is entirely devoted to demonstrating the congruence between Adam Kadmon and Christ, based on quotations from a Syriac version of the New Testament.²² In *The Principles*, Conway generally refers to Christ as “the First Begotten Son of God” or the “Medium” or “middle being” in order to emphasize the analogy between Christ and Adam Kadmon. She insists that even though the medium is called by divers names, they all refer to the same entity.²³

As a matter of fact, a cautious use of vocabulary is another of Conway’s strategies to bring the conversion of the Jews. She argues that concessions should be made, and that one should not be adamant about the use and meaning of words. For example, she explains that the Son of God is not a *creature* of God *per se*, but rather “a Generation or an Emanation from God,” not a creation. Nevertheless, she adds that, taken in a broader sense, the word “creation” can also be used to refer to the Son of God as it is the word used in the Bible, and she concludes: “’tis needless to contend about Words.”²⁴ The awareness that some words can be deemed offensive by other religions is also what leads Conway to redefine the Trinity at the very beginning of her text: the final sections of the first chapter explain

[h]ow a Trinity may be conceived to be in God, according to the Scriptures; and yet without Offence to Turks, Jews, or any other People, though we should omit the terms of Three distinct Persons, which are neither built upon Scripture or sound Reason.²⁵

Instead, the Trinity, according to Conway, is composed of wisdom, idea and word,²⁶ and is thus more likely to receive the assent of non-Christians.

The figure of Christ is also used by Conway to reveal correspondences between Quaker theology and kabbalistic thought. Quakerism is never explicitly mentioned in *The Principles*, but insistence is made on the inner presence of Christ in all creatures, rather than on his Passion, which is only briefly mentioned in a rather traditional narrative of the death and resurrection of Christ at

²² See Francis van Helmont, *Sketch of Christian Kabbalism*, trans. and ed. Sheila A. Spector (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), chapter III “Of the Mediator of the First Production or Adam Kadmon.” The analogy probably came from Abraham Cohen Herrera’s *Porta coelorum* (included in the first volume of *Kabbala denudata*).

²³ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter VI, Section 1, 179: “[...] maintaining that there is such a *Medium*, which they called by divers names, as *Logos*, the Son of God, the First Begotten Son of God, Mind, Wisdom, heavenly Adam &c. So that some also do call him the Eternal *Medium*.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter V, Section 4, 170.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter I, titles of Sections 6 and 7, 149.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter I, Section 7, 150.

the end of chapter V. After quoting *Galatians* 5:9 about Christ being “that little Leaven that change the whole Lump” (an image that may have appealed to Conway because of its alchemical dimension), she describes Christ’s suffering in these words:

He descended then within Time, and for a certain space or period, of his own accord subjected himself to the Laws of Time, so as to endure great Torments, even Death it self; but Death did not long detain him, for the Third Day he rose again, and this was the end of all his Sufferings, even of his Death and Burial, viz. that he might Heal, Cure, and Redeem his Creatures from Death and Corruption, which came upon them by the Fall, and so at length hereby put an end to Times, and elevate the Creatures above Times to himself, where he abideth, who is the same yesterday, today, henceforth, and for ever, without Decay, Death, or Corruption.²⁷

This is the only mention of Christ’s Passion – yet the very symbol of the value and function of suffering – in a text that largely aims to make sense of pain, and there is here no precise description of the ordeals that Christ endured. On the contrary, Conway insists on the “intrinsic presence” of Christ, an expression that comes up several times.²⁸ His being a medium means that Christ is used as an “instrument” by God, “by which he [God] co-operates in his creatures,”²⁹ Christ’s nature being closer to that of the creatures than God’s. Conway repeatedly mentions the inner presence of Christ: “Now it follows that the Son himself must be immediately present in all these [the creatures], that he may bless and benefit them” and “he must needs exist within them [the creatures],” and she unsurprisingly claims that the middle being is omnipresent.³⁰ She echoes even more clearly the Quaker theology when she refers to “the Light and Spirit of *Christ Jesus* our Lord, in the Hearts of Men.”³¹ In *The Principles*, Christ is much more the inner light existing within creatures than the historical Christ.

In this regard, Conway’s conception of Christ is very similar to that presented in George Keith’s *The Way to the City of God* (written in 1669, published in 1678), in which Christ is also defined as a “Mediator,” “the first born of all creatures,” as well as “a certain middle nature, substance or being, betwixt the God-head and mankind.”³² Both Conway’s and Keith’s treatises insist on the

²⁷ Ibid., Chapter V, Section 6, 172.

²⁸ Ibid., Chapter VII, title of Section 4, 191: “Intrinsick Presence only pertains to God and Christ”; then Chapter VII, Section 4, 203, intrinsic presence is presented as a prerogative of God and Christ.

²⁹ Ibid., Chapter V, Section 4, 170.

³⁰ Ibid.: “[...] by consequence [Christ] must necessarily be Omnipresent.”

³¹ Ibid., Chapter VI, Section 9, 187.

³² See George Keith, *The Way to the City of God* (London, 1678), 128–133.

metaphysical function of Christ as medium between God and the creatures, and they describe Christ in similar terms, such as “balsam,” a term from hermetic medicine, which refers to a conception of Christ as a medicine that cures, restores, and preserves the whole creation from corruption.³³ Conway may also have been aware that the Quaker notion of “Christ within” could be interpreted along the same lines as the kabbalistic notion of *Shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God.³⁴

While van Helmont argued in *Seder Olam* that the conversion of the Jews would follow the adoption by Christians of the doctrine of the revolution of souls,³⁵ Conway made this much looked-for “conversion” dependent upon agreement on the ontological role of Christ as mediator between God and his creatures.

3 Christ, women, and the “love of pain”: A seventeenth-century feminist Christology?

In order to fully understand Conway’s Christology, one should keep in mind that *The Principles* is primarily an attempt at making sense of suffering – Conway’s own suffering but also, more generally, the existence of pain and evil in the world. In this regard, her most elaborate account of the existence and function of pain is the doctrine of “transmutations” [*transmutatio* in the Latin version] that she develops at length in her text. According to Conway, creatures, being characterised by their mutability, cannot but change and move towards good or evil (if they did not change, they would be confounded with God). As there is no exact opposite of God in Conway’s thought, therefore no dead matter or absolute evil, creatures cannot move towards evil indefinitely, they will eventually move

33 Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter V, Section 6, 171: “[Christ] is a most powerful and effectual Balsam, which can preserve all things from Death and Corruption,” and Keith, *The Way to the City of God*, 135: “it is ordained and appointed of God to be that Universal Balsam or Medicine, to cure and restore, not only all these of Mankind in Soul and Body (who shall receive him inwardly by Faith and Love) but also to cure and restore the whole outward Creation, from its Distempers and Corruptions, that are come upon it, through sin.”

34 On the *Shekinah*, see Alain Ekorong, “Guillaume Postel, the *Shechinah*, and the Feminine Principle,” in *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 41–62. As Marion L. Kuntz explains, Guillaume Postel defined the *Shekinah* as “Christ within man,” in *Guillaume Postel. Prophet of the Restitution of All Things* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 133. See also Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 146.

35 Van Helmont, *Seder Olam*, 118.

back towards good and then progress towards greater good – without ever being able to reach God's goodness – after a certain number of “transmutations,” which are described both as revolutions of the soul and natural mutations or “metamorphoses.”³⁶ Thus, a man who leads a bad or unjust life will be punished by his transformation into an inferior being in the ontological hierarchy, as many times as necessary for him to finally come back towards good, until he regains his prelapsarian soul (or even a better soul, according to Conway). Conway explains that all beings undergo transmutations. She gives the example of a horse that behaves as is expected of it and shows many qualities, so that it cannot remain a horse forever; after several transmutations, it will eventually be changed into a man and therefore become a better, higher creature on the chain of beings.³⁷ In Conway's theodicy, transmutations manifest God's justice since creatures are punished or rewarded proportionally to the good or evil they have done. Therefore, Conway's is also a philosophy of universal redemption: all creatures will eventually be redeemed, even though they first have to go through periods of pain and corruption – or precisely *because* they endure such pain and corruption.

Indeed, Conway equates change – or transmutations – with pain and suffering. She explains that the pain endured by creatures in their several metamorphoses has the power to change evil into good, or body into spirit, and, so doing, enables creatures to expiate their sins:

[...] every pain and torment excites or stirs up an operating Spirit and Life in every thing which suffers; as we observe by continued Experience and Reason teacheth us that of necessity it must be so; because through Pain, and the enduring thereof, every kind of crassitude or grossness in Spirit or Body contracted is attenuated, and so the Spirit captivated or detained in that grossness or crassitude is set at liberty, and made more spiritual, and consequently more active and operative, through suffering.³⁸

It appears from this passage that the function of pain in Conway's philosophical system is to act on body so as to make it subtler and more refined, so that the

³⁶ The word “metamorphosis” is used in *The Principles*, Chapter VII, Section 1, 193 as a synonym of “transmutation.” “Transmutations” are defined by Conway as migrations or revolutions of the soul (VI, 6, 181) and as natural mutations (VI, 6, 182–183). See also *The Principles*, Chapter IX, Section 5, 224: “For in all Transmutations of Creatures from one *Species* into another, as from Stone into Earth, and from Earth into Grass, and from Grass to a Sheep, and from a Sheep into Humane Flesh, and from Humane Flesh into the most servile Spirits of Man, and from these into his noblest Spirits [...]” This process of transmutations echoes the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

³⁷ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter VI, Section 6, 180–181.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, Section 1, 193.

creature can become more spiritual and therefore move towards greater good. In this regard, pain can be said to have an alchemical power: it acts as a purifying compound since its role is to refine body and turn it into spirit. This idea is reinforced by the description of bodies as “shops” (similar to alchemists’ workshops) in which the grosser spirits produce more subtle spirits through pain: “for although [Spirits] are detained [in Bodies], yet they are not idle in their Prison, but their Bodies are as it were Shops [*officina* in the Latin version] for them to Work out those subtiler Spirits [...]”³⁹

The model for this alchemical conception of pain as leading to purification was Christ’s Passion, which was represented as an allegory of alchemical process from the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ And in Conway’s philosophy, pain, like Christ, has a curative or medicinal role (as was mentioned above, for Conway, as well as for Keith, Christ is a “universal balsam” or medicine): “all these Punishments (the worst not excepted) do tend to their [the creatures’] Good and Restoration, and so are Medicinal, that by them these diseased Creatures may be cured and restored to a better condition than before they enjoyed.”⁴¹ In suffering and enduring pain (or going through transmutations), creatures imitate Christ if they accept pain as the purifying compound that ensures their redemption. Or more precisely, they do not so much imitate the historical Christ in his sufferings as accept his presence within them, where he acts for their redemption by transforming body into spirit. Christ can thus be equated with pain itself and with the alchemical power of transforming body into spirit. Contrary to Keith and Penn, Conway does not assimilate Christ’s body to the Philosopher’s Stone, but she may have shared a similar alchemical conception of Christ.⁴²

The suffering Conway writes about in *The Principles* is also her own. It is very clear from her correspondence that only the Quakers managed to alleviate that pain, mainly thanks to their own *experience* of suffering. Thus, in a letter to More, dated 4 February 1676, in which Conway defends the Quakers against the

³⁹ Ibid., Chapter VIII, Section 5, 218. See also VI, 7, 185 and VIII, 5, 217.

⁴⁰ See Urszula Szulakowska, “Christ and the Alchemical Mass,” in *Alternative Christs*, ed. Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 87–112. See also Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 145, 184 and 206.

⁴¹ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter VI, Section 10, 188.

⁴² Keith, *The Way to the City of God*, 136. See also William Penn’s *No Cross, No Crown* (London, 1682, first pub. 1669), a book that echoes Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitatio Christi*: “[...] the Word of God is compared to a Fire, and the Day of Salvation to an Oven; and Christ himself to a Refiner of Gold, and a Purifier of Silver” (The preface, A⁴). On Christ as the Philosopher’s Stone, see Carl J. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), part III, chapter 5, “The Lapis-Christ Parallel” (345–431), although Jung’s analysis has been contested in the past decades. Also Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, 67–68 and 200.

Cambridge Platonist's association of Quakerism with enthusiasm, she insists on "the involuntary pain or greife experimentally felt" by the Quakers, who faced harsh persecution in Restoration England:

They have been and are a suffering people and are taught from the consolation [that] has been experimentally felt by them under their great tryals to administer comfort upon occasion to others in great distresse [...] the particular acquaintance with such living examples of great patience under sundry heavy exercises, both of bodily sicknesse and other calamitys (as some of them have related to me) I find begett a more lively fayth and uninterrupted desire of approaching to such a behaviour in like exigencies, then the most learned and Rhetorical discourses of resignation can doe.⁴³

This passage primarily shows the value of experience when it comes to suffering: Conway clearly states that she is bound to trust the Quakers on suffering because they have *experienced* it. Quakers themselves did value experience above learning: the doctrine of the "inner light" emphasized personal experience and practice, as opposed to the erudition of university-educated clergymen. Thus, a *vita activa* was to be preferred to a *vita contemplativa* – or action to belief.⁴⁴ This excerpt from Conway's letter also shows that in order to be able to endure pain, one should follow the example of someone who's experienced it ("desire of approaching to such a behaviour"), hence the value of imitation in bearing pain. The insistence on "experimentally felt" suffering underlines the idea, which is also implicit in *The Principles*, that salvation is not the result of faith in Christ or Christ's Passion, but rather the result of the ability to imitate Christ, meaning to embrace one's suffering and react positively to it (imitation being action and not belief). This idea underlines again the superiority or priority of experience or action over belief or learning.⁴⁵

⁴³ Conway to More, 4 February 1675/76, in *The Conway Letters*, 422.

⁴⁴ On the meaning of "experience" and "experiment" for the early Quakers, see Jeffrey Dudiak and Laura Rediehs, "Quakers, Philosophy, and Truth," in *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, eds. Steven W. Angell and Pink Dandelion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 515, and Geoffrey Cantor, *Quakers, Jews, and Science. Religious Responses to Modernity and the Sciences in Britain, 1650–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 6, 225–247. Cantor argues that early Quakers had a strong empiricist view of science.

⁴⁵ See Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, where she explains that in *The Principles* "salvation is the result of an individual's positive response to suffering, not an axiomatic consequence of a belief in Christ and Christ's atonement for man's sins," 207. On *imitatio Christi* as action, see for example Adrian Streete, *Protestantism and Drama in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21. It is highly probable that Conway had read John Worthington's translation of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, published in London in 1654 under the title *The Christian's Pattern*, since Worthington was a member of More's Cambridge circle and is often mentioned in the *Conway Letters*.

It has been argued that the Quaker notion of “Christ within” or the “inner light” was more likely to lead to identification with Christ than to imitation of Christ: that they believed in their own divinity was actually one of the most common criticisms levelled against early Quakers.⁴⁶ In Conway’s philosophy, the hypothesis of an identification of creatures with Christ is reinforced by the assertion that the pain of one creature contributes to the improvement and redemption of the whole creation (as Christ’s Passion leads to the redemption of humanity). Moreover, in *The Principles*, creatures are also creators or producers of other creatures, like Christ. Indeed, in a passage from chapter IX which gives an account of motion, Conway endeavours to demonstrate that motion is transmitted from one body to another by creatures that give motion and action to other creatures through a creating process:

Therefore the manner of the said propagation is (as it were) by real Production or Creation; so that as God and Christ can only create the Substance of a Thing, when as no Creature can Create or give Being to any Substance, no not as an Instrument; so a Creature, not of it self, but in subordination to God, as his Instrument may give existence to Motion and vital Action, and so the Motion in one Creature may produce Motion in another. And this is all a Creature can do towards the moving it self or its Fellow Creatures, as being the Instrument of God, by which Motions a new Substance is not created, but only new *Species* of Things so that Creatures may be multiplied in their Kinds, whilst one acts upon, and moves another; and this is the whole Work of the Creature, or Creation, as the Instrument of God.⁴⁷

Conway insists in this passage that creatures cannot create new substances, a creation which is the privilege of God and Christ. But they do create other creatures similar to themselves, as is made obvious at the end of this excerpt (“Creatures may be multiplied in their Kinds”), although they cannot create another kind of beings. Moreover, creatures are here presented as the “instrument” of God, which is precisely how Christ is also described earlier in the book when Conway explains that Christ is the being from which all creatures emanate, and that he is therefore intrinsically present in them. Only God has the power to create, but he shares this attribute with Christ and the creatures because he needs mediators, his nature being so much above that of the other beings. As “instruments,” creatures are not only creators, but also mediators, like Christ. Therefore, *imitatio Christi* is not understood here as emulation of

⁴⁶ See for example Rosemary Moore, *The Light in their Consciences. The Early Quakers in Britain, 1646–66* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 110. See also Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 184.

⁴⁷ Conway, *The Principles*, Chapter IX, Section 9, 230.

Christ's humanity, but rather as participation in the redemption of the world made possible by his function as middle being.⁴⁸

One might assume that, as a woman who experienced "the greatest afflictions"⁴⁹ throughout her life, Conway would have developed a personal connection with Christ. Indeed, the pain she endured, as well as her Christocentric views, cannot but call to mind medieval female mystics' conceptions of and relations with Christ. If the theology of these women took different, and sometimes apparently contradictory forms, they all emphasized Christ's humanity and suffering, and described him as a husband, a son or a father, sometimes also as a mother from the twelfth century.⁵⁰ The maternal imagery of the devotion to "Jesus our Mother" was developed in particular by the fourteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich, for whom Christ fed his children with his blood as a mother feeds the fetus she bears.⁵¹ The close connection between suffering and women's piety was founded on the idea that women were more capable than men of identifying with Christ's pain, as a consequence of their "gift of suffering."⁵² Women's meditations on the Passion that built upon

48 On medieval understandings of *imitatio Christi*, see Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," in *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 143–248. The conception of Christ as the Philosopher's Stone, mentioned above, and the identification with Christ are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary. As Szulakowska explains, the assimilation of Christ with the Philosopher's Stone led to the idea that the laboratory process transmuted the alchemist himself into a Christ-like figure, on the model of communion in the Catholic Church, in "Christ and the Alchemical Mass," 88–89.

49 Conway to George Rawdon, 25 September 1674, in *The Conway Letters*, 533.

50 On Christ as husband and on "mystical marriage," see Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England. Religious Reading and Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On Christ as a virgin, see for example Esther Cohen, *The Modulated Scream. Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 2010), in particular 215. On the sex of Christ, see for example Joan Gibson, "Could Christ Have Been Born a Woman? A Medieval Debate," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8, 1 (Spring 1992): 65–82.

51 See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

52 See Esther Cohen, "The Expression of Pain in the Later Middle Ages. Deliverance, Acceptance, and Infamy," in *Bodily Extremities. Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, eds. Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 211–213.

this medieval legacy were common in seventeenth-century England, for example in the works of Aemilia Lanyer.⁵³

Moreover, in most of the doctrines that inspired Conway's philosophy, women had a privileged relationship with Christ. In the Kabbalah, for example, the *Shekinah*, or indwelling presence of God, can be seen as a female principle, "the feminine spirit of Christ."⁵⁴ This principle was very much used by a Christian kabbalist like Guillaume Postel, who claimed that a woman he met in Italy in 1547, Mother Joanna, was the new messiah and the embodiment of the *Shekinah*. In the context of the *querelle des femmes*, in which women were commonly associated with the body, Postel argued that the lower part of human nature had not been redeemed by Christ's first incarnation, and therefore, the second Messiah must be a woman.⁵⁵ Van Helmont himself established a clear link between women and Christ as he believed, along with some anatomists, that a woman was born with all her eggs, which therefore made her similar to Adam Kadmon in whom the souls of all creatures were contained.⁵⁶

Although there is little doubt that Conway knew about those mystical conceptions of Christ, which all posited a special relationship with women, the middle being she describes in *The Principles* does not seem to borrow much from those representations. Indeed, as was shown above, Conway's is primarily a *metaphysical* Christ, not the human Christ who endured physical pain, and whose suffering was depicted with much detail in seventeenth-century women's meditations on the Passion. Neither is he the husband, son, father or mother of medieval female mystics. Instead, Conway's conception of Christ echoes *Galatians* 3:28 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus"), a verse often quoted as the founding text of feminist theology, as it may be interpreted as an alternative way of reintroducing women into religion through Christ's "ungenderedness." While in the Middle Ages, "[f]emale *imitatio Christi*

53 Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve deus rex judaeorum* (London, 1611), in particular poem 1 "The Passion of Christ."

54 Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 105.

55 Guillaume Postel, *Les très-merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde* (Paris, 1553). Conway may have known about Postel as he had been a member of the Family of Love, a sect in which she was very much interested in 1669–1670. See also Yvonne Petry, *Gender, Kabbalah and the Reformation. The Mystical Theology of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), and Jean-Pierre Brach, "Son of the Son of God: The Feminine Messiah and her Progeny, according to Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)," in *Alternative Christs*, 113–130.

56 Francis van Helmont, *The Paradoxal Discourses* (London, 1685), chapters II and III. See also Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 267.

mingled the genders in its most profound metaphors and its most profound experiences,"⁵⁷ the metaphysical Christ of Conway's philosophy, who is present in each creature, whether male or female, is himself neither male nor female. Gender differences are thus neutralized, and an egalitarian theology of redemption is put forward by Conway.

Yet, if there is no sign in Conway's treatise or correspondence of a personal relationship with Christ based on her sex and her suffering, members of her circle would associate her with Christ. Thus, in a letter written in 1677, in which the Quaker Lillias Skene tried to bring solace to Conway, she drew a portrait of the Viscountess as a Christ-like figure:

My desirs are that mor and mor that eye may be opened in thee that looks beyond the things that are seen, and in the living sence of the invisable glorie of the kingdom of god thou may live above the desir of temporarie satisfactions, praying secretly in thy heart that by all thy present suferings thin iniquetis may be perched away and senseteev netur be crusified, in the death of which shal com to regn whos right it is, and the conforter whom no man can tak from thee will dwel in thee and abyd with thee for ever [...]⁵⁸

Skene expresses the idea that through acceptance of pain, Conway becomes a "co-redeemer with Christ,"⁵⁹ turning her suffering into a gift and a sign of election. Conway's privileged relationship with Christ is also found in a Latin poem dedicated to her and often attributed to Adam Boreel,⁶⁰ which tells the story of Philalgia, the last-born daughter of Christ, and her intended spouse, pain. When it was time for Philalgia to get married, Christ descended from Heaven, "bringing pain by the hand." To dissipate Philalgia's fear, he assured her that "life is pain," and pain is thus "virtue," "energy," and "nourishment." Philalgia eventually married pain and "embraced the body

57 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 221.

58 Lillias Skene to Conway, 16 June 1677, in *The Conway Letters*, 439.

59 Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist. Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 12.

60 The poem was found among John Locke's papers in the Bodleian Library. Grace B. Sherrer gave the Latin version as well as an English translation of the text (which she attributed to van Helmont) in her article "Philalgia in Warwickshire: Francis van Helmont's Anatomy of Pain Applied to Lady Anne Conway," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 5 (1958): 196–206. The text was then attributed to Adam Boreel, the leader of the Dutch Collegiants and author of the unpublished manuscript, *Jesus Christ. The Law Giver of the Human Race* (see Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 279, and Hutton, *Anne Conway*, 231).

of her spouse.” In the text, Christ also says that a man who accepts and loves pain imitates him:

he walks with me in equal pace and completely resembles me in the image of my divine form. Not only does he suffer, but he is kindled with a marvellous love of pain, and does not fail to offer eternal thanks that there are signs to such great blessings [...].

This text was initially attributed to van Helmont because it perfectly illustrates his doctrine of the “love of pain,” based on the idea that pain is nothing but “an excess of life.”⁶¹ It also echoes the “philopassianism”⁶² of the late Middle Ages, as well as the book of Margery Kempe, a medieval laywoman who presented herself as Christ’s daughter. Like Conway’s, Margery Kempe’s conception of Christ did not imply the eroticization of female mystics’ Christocentric piety. Instead, she claimed that Christ was hidden in her soul, anticipating the Quaker idea of “Christ within.”⁶³

One cannot overestimate the importance of the figure of Christ in Anne Conway’s philosophy. As an instrument of conversion, Christ is the metaphysical principle on which all religions can rationally agree. As a promise of redemption, he justifies the existence of pain and evil as alchemical compounds that effect the refinement of the body, and therefore the expiation of sins. Conway’s focus on Christ does not present itself as a resurgence of medieval female mystics’ Christologies; instead, her philosophy builds a convergence of thoughts on Christ from several traditions, mainly the Kabbalah, Quakerism, Neoplatonism and alchemy, from which Christ emerges as the common denominator. In this regard, the thought presented in *The Principles* is a perfect illustration of the Renaissance idea of *prisca theologia*, the “ancient theology” that held ideals of philosophical and religious reconciliation. At the time of the emergence of modern science and new methods of enquiry, Conway’s thought may be deemed outdated or “arrière-garde,” but it was undeniably deeply

61 See Francis van Helmont, *The Spirit of Diseases; Or, Diseases from the Spirit* (London, 1694), 36–37.

62 The word “philopassianism” was coined by Esther Cohen in “Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages,” *Science in Context*, 8, 1 (Spring 1995): 47–74.

63 Christine Peters’ analysis of Margery Kempe’s piety and how it differed from that of medieval female mystics can also apply to Conway’s Christopresentism: “For Margery, the idea of divine fusion was translated into an un-gendered identification with the sufferings inflicted upon Christ rather than a spiritualized eroticism that required the definition of gendered roles,” in *Patterns of Piety. Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 91.

embedded in the religious culture of the Restoration, when post-war fears and hopes led to a revival of all forms of mysticism and Millenarianism.

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