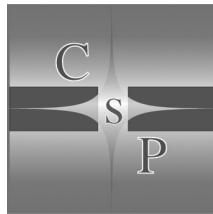


Algernon Sidney Crapsey

Algernon Sidney Crapsey:
The Last of the Heretics

By

Stephen T. Neese



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Algernon Sidney Crapsey: The Last of the Heretics, by Stephen T. Neese

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INTRODUCTION

It had not been my intention from the beginning to resurrect the spirit of Algernon Sidney Crapsey. I merely sought to document the details of his life and provide perspective on his famous trial for heresy in 1906. I hoped to deal with how it affected the religious history of the nation, if at all. What I stumbled upon was nearly overwhelming. Studying the life of Crapsey was for me, an incredible, ever-expanding experience. The closer I looked the more I discovered until I had more than I thought I could handle. Had I not found significance in the experiences and expressions of his life I would have gladly let his memory continue on its ever-downward spiral into obscurity. I quickly realized however, that studying Crapsey's life was not only important from a biographical point of view but also as a microcosmic exercise in documenting the social, cultural and intellectual changes of the nation that occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was a definite progressive and independent spirit that rushed forth from the pages of his old books, journal articles, newspaper columns and letters written by and about him. So much so, that the ever-changing voice of Crapsey was able to speak clearly through his writings.

Having been raised in what I considered the conservative city of Rochester, New York, I was amazed that I had never heard of Crapsey or his famous trial until researching American religious history in 1997. I came across a book published in 1966, edited by George H. Shriver about American Religious Heretics. To my surprise one of the articles in the book was about Rochester, New York and a heresy trial that occurred there. Moreover, it was about an Episcopalian, the church of my nativity. My interest was sufficiently stimulated to continue on and to eventually take on the project of writing a biography on Algernon Sidney Crapsey.

Everything written about Crapsey previously concentrated on his trial without going into much detail about his fascinating life. Crapsey also provided an account of the trial in his autobiography published at the age of seventy-five in 1924.¹ His autobiography essentially culminates with the trial. The most scholarly account of the trial has been offered by Hugh M. Jansen Jr. in his narrative entitled, "Algernon S. Crapsey: Heresy at Rochester." Jansen carefully details the trial that took place in Batavia, New York and the subsequent appeal. However, Jansen presents only a

¹ Algernon Sidney Crapsey, *The Last of the Heretics* (New York: Knopf, 1924).

brief synopsis of the events leading up to the trial and very little about what took place afterwards.² Since then, Carolyn Swanton has provided a general overview of Crapsey's ministry as a social reformer in Rochester.³

The processes involved were intriguing. The more I researched, the more I realized the tremendous changes Crapsey went through to arrive at the point of his disconnection with the Protestant Episcopal Church. The external developments in the secular world and the internal developments in the church influenced Crapsey to deny all that he had been a part of for more than a quarter of a century. The results affected both family and friends regardless of his eventual satisfaction with the appellation of heretic. Nevertheless, the distinction meant something, perhaps much different then than it does today. Most importantly, there were discernable psychological occurrences and a noticeable intellectual progression that culminated in his public utterances and ultimately his conviction for heresy. Crapsey was, in the end, held responsible and judged culpable.

One had to wonder why the Crapsey case stimulated so much public controversy. The attention provoked by the "modern-day heresy trial" held the interest of the nation for nearly two years. Articles that documented the progress of the trial appearing in virtually every major newspaper in America attested to this fact. The *New York Times* was particularly intrigued with the case. Editorial sections in New York, Rochester and elsewhere were jammed with the opinions of people concerned with the ramifications of the trial. But, less than twenty years later another heresy case, this time involving a retired bishop of the same church, caused virtually no public outcry, involvement or excitement at all. What was it about Crapsey that was so demonstrably fascinating to the nation? There were many important questions.

Furthermore, I considered whether heresy was now an outmoded concept, especially in organizations like the Episcopal Church. I wondered to what extent, if any, Crapsey was responsible for the changing conceptions concerning doctrinal orthodoxy that affected the church. I considered whether the Crapsey case could have influenced the later contentions of heresy involving Bishop Pike or the various utterances of

² Hugh M. Jansen Jr., "Algernon S. Crapsey: Heresy at Rochester," George H. Shriver ed., *American Religious Heretics* (New York, 1966).

³ Carolyn Swanton, "Dr. Algernon S. Crapsey: Religious Reformer," *Rochester History*, Vol. XLII No. 1 January, 1980. Portions of this paragraph appear in Stephen T. Neese, "Algernon Sidney Crapsey and the Move for Presentment." In *Anglican and Episcopal History* John F. Woolverton ed. Sept. 2001 Vol. LXX No. 3.

Bishop Spang. Certainly Crapsey embodied all of the radical-mindedness of Bishop Pike, as well as the controversial nature of Bishop Spang. Did the historic Crapsey case contribute to their understanding of the changing role of the church? How much, if any responsibility could be laid at the foot of Crapsey's unimposing cemetery plot for any of the subsequent Episcopalian controversies?

Obviously, the Episcopal Church has come a long way since Crapsey's heresy trial in 1906. Documenting the transformation that took place in Crapsey's life provided context and meaning to the historic events that transpired in 1906 and beyond, even if those factors including the concept of heresy has become intellectually outmoded. Perhaps Crapsey was right after all about his legacy, that his trial was the seminal point of intellectual and cultural departure concerning doctrinal orthodoxy in American Christianity.

Crapsey's early life showed little concern with the religious until he stumbled into a Protestant Episcopal Church one cold, snowy evening. He had always been interested in the accumulation of knowledge. Perhaps it was because the nation had not yet loosed itself from its intellectual ties to the religious that Crapsey was truly moved to explore that life further. There has always been a relationship in this country, albeit sometimes tenuous, between the intellectual and the ethical. It has been our national legacy, like it or not, to maintain an association with the academic that pulsates with altruistic, moral undertones. Crapsey realized this fact intuitively, especially considering his family background.

The Protestant Episcopal Church has maintained a sort of younger sibling relationship with the Anglican Church of Great Britain. During the American Revolution the need to disassociate from the Erastian institutional connection and mask the British constitutional relationship resulted in the changing of the name to its present form. The church has always however maintained its commitment to the Anglican liturgy and its traditions. In antebellum years the Protestant Episcopal Church imported both the form and the enthusiasm of the Oxford Movement. Crapsey initially loved the pomp and the ritual associated with the "Catholic sect" of the church. But there was another movement that sprang forth from the great British academic institutions. Broad religiosity encouraged open and rational thinking, Christian socialism, as well as unity in the church. Broad churchmen attempted to break down the walls of separation between the various factions of Anglicanism. In doing so, they targeted dogmatic differences as the culprits of denominational disunity. Their energies would eventually turn to the denominations outside the Anglican

Communion as well, as broad churchmen became leaders in the worldwide, ecumenical movement.

To some extent, they sought to reestablish the dream of James I of reuniting Christendom. However, in the place of sound doctrine, the broad churchmen encouraged a sometimes-superficial morality based upon piety and good works. Anglican Catholicity eventually emphasized ecumenical diversity and a wide appreciation for varied opinions. In the case of some who recognized an incongruity between historic doctrinal perspectives and modernistic thinking there was a compulsion to integrate contemporary scientific theories and modern political, economic and social concepts into the acceptable regimen of the church. For Crapsey and many others, socialism, science and evolution took the lead in the process of displacing the traditional doctrines of the church, expressed by a strict adherence to the creeds. By the beginning of the twentieth century both the old and the new dogmatists, were locked in a definite struggle contending for the hearts and minds of religious America. In the end, “secular humanism” was religion indeed to Crapsey and many others.⁴ The Protestant Episcopal Church’s factionalism and the Crapsey trial both reflected and accentuated America’s struggle with social and intellectual change.

Crapsey started his religious life in the church as a dogmatic Anglo-Catholic. He never had a problem making up his mind or expressing a clear opinion about issues. Much of his “Catholicism” may have been an attraction to what was then considered aberrant and unorthodox behavior by traditionalists in the Protestant denomination. It may have kindled in him a natural rebelliousness that he associated with his maternal grandfather’s combativeness over slavery. But when men like Phillips Brooks came on the scene and preached the “gospel of toleration,” Crapsey was faced with a weighty decision. All of the social indicators seemed to point to the fact that science and technological development supported the new theories of biological and social evolution. The significant social question that the Crapsey case asked was, would the church adapt to a new dogmatic or persist with the old?

In contrast, social Darwinism presented an interesting challenge to those who sought an increase in democracy to accompany the growth of the academy and changes in the social paradigm. However, after the war had been won to free the black man from physical bondage they were brought immediately back into economic, social and political bondage with the growing cultural acceptance of a social theory that characterized

⁴ Crapsey eventually considered himself a secular humanist and this was the term used by him and others to comprehensively describe their experience.

them as lesser beings on the evolutionary scale of development. Social Darwinism would undoubtedly weigh as heavily as the cotton bales slaves were once forced to heave as African-Americans and others now had to deal with scientific racism based upon intellectual misconceptions about mental capacity and inequality. Crapsey however, could effectively detach his newly developed intellectual moorings from his stronger beliefs in American democratic values to make himself, like his grandfather, a friend of the American Negro.

Crapsey's years as an evangelist for Catholic Episcopalianism were spent in intellectual struggle as he grappled over conflicting secular and religious influences and his direction both within and without the church. His concern with bringing all the parties of the church together eventually led him resolutely into broad churchmanship. A complex combination of scientific, religious and personal influences eventually persuaded him to dismiss the significance of doctrinal orthodoxy. Crapsey recognized the conflict between Christian church doctrine and evolutionary science and he worked tirelessly to bring the two into intellectual harmony. Crapsey felt an overriding need first to downplay and then to dismiss dogmatic differences for the cause of homogeneity in the church.

Other influences also affected the way Crapsey responded to the intellectual revolution and the social transformation at the turn of the twentieth century. Lewis Henry Morgan contended that socialism was the next step on the developmental ladder of societal evolution. Crapsey venerated the great anthropologist from Rochester, New York. Morgan's concentration on evolution, science and socialism further influenced Crapsey's turn away from the orthodox, historic Christian faith.

Crapsey felt that broad churchmanship was the way to accomplish unity and introduce a new and multi-faceted dogmatic into the church, while remaining true to his ethical impulses. The Social Gospel further contributed to Crapsey's complex understanding of how the church must progress. It took the focus off individual salvation and placed it squarely onto society as a whole. Furthermore, the rise of Keswickian perfectionism added to the complexity of the religious milieu bringing individual responsibility to bear upon crucial questions about society. All of these influences, coupled with the progressiveness of political reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created a dynamic, yet volatile situation for the American church. Inevitably, orthodoxy expressed by an adherence to the creeds was brought into question. Social reform had been one of the traditional occupations of the church. Now however, the church, like society itself, wrestled with its own definition, its place in enacting meaningful reform in light of new social scientific theories and

methods, not to mention its significance and continuity in a historical context.

Crapsey was a man given to action personally as well as socially. As such, he was perpetually busy. His intellectual busyness coupled with his love for knowledge caused him first to wonder and then to wander from his religious moorings. He was characteristically prone to seeking truth, as he understood it. He was not a hypocrite. He refused to compromise his thoughts or opinions on matters of the utmost intellectual importance. This led him to be enraptured by the contemporary scholarship then sweeping throughout the Anglican academic institutions and eventually to subscribe to a liberal perspective as a means of bringing the church up to date with the rest of the world. This meant an acceptance of scientifically based, historical research, as well as the employment of “higher criticism” as a means of discovering the “real value” of the biblical texts. For Crapsey, and many others, the scholarly standard had shifted from scriptural infallibility based on faith to the scientific confirmation of theoretic models based on reason as the means for establishing acceptable truth.

Crapsey’s respect for the scholarship of men like Brooks, Kingsley, Maurice, Colenso, Morgan, Marx and others persuaded him to make decisions about the accuracy of his faith and to address the hard questions that the new scholarship was bringing to the surface. Crapsey was a man given to great passion and intellectual extremes. He held a high regard for what he considered the truth. But unlike such men as Phillips Brooks who would receive the office of a bishop before his death, Crapsey lacked the discretion necessary to positively challenge and ultimately change the church. He was unable to formulate and articulate concepts that were held by men like Brooks in a religiously acceptable manner. He would eventually question all the cardinal doctrines of the historic Christian faith without regard to the conservative element of the church. In the same way, he completely denied the miraculous and therefore, from a biblically based, literal context, he actually denied the centrality of not just the historic faith, but of faith itself.⁵

Through the prodding of a friend, who went with him on a walking tour of the British Isles, Crapsey hit upon an idea to present a series of lectures about the history of the church. He sought to examine and interpret through his new dogmatic lens the relationship between religion and politics in western society since the times of the Romans. He eventually made some statements about the Virgin Birth that were obviously unorthodox. The press jumped on them. Crapsey would have

⁵ See Hebrews Chapter 11.

been granted grace by his bishop had he not pushed the issue to the extreme both in his combativeness in the press and in journal articles where he defended his right to think and speak as he felt led. He may have still been granted grace by the diocese but he subsequently chose to publish the lecture series in book form. The publication was representative of Crapsey symbolically thumbing his nose at the religious organization that had employed him for over a quarter of a century. It stated in effect, 'this is in print now and thus it will remain, and so now you must deal with it.' Ultimately the church did.⁶

The bishop of the diocese, William D. Walker, appointed a committee of investigation to inquire into the circumstances at St. Andrew's. While severely criticizing Crapsey's "utterances," the committee finally recommended that Crapsey not be presented for heresy. The popular impression remains that the later presentment was against the prevailing opinion of the diocese. The general consensus in the literature supposes that the continued action against Crapsey was the product of a strong-willed bishop and conservative churchmen who simply overruled the recommendations of the diocesan committee and likewise trumped lay opinion in the diocese. However, a closer examination of the events leading to presentment clearly demonstrates that the bishop did little if anything prior to Crapsey's provocation. When the church refused to act, Crapsey started another series this time denying the veracity and the imminence of the Second Advent. The diocese finally, with the controversy raging in the press, the denomination and the other churches in Rochester, presented him for heresy. Crapsey's incessant public exhibition, including his continuous prodding of the diocese eventually led to his presentment.⁷

Moreover, opinion was clearly divided throughout the diocese, as well as in the country concerning the Crapsey affair. The trial became a sounding board for the opinionates of the day. Diverse perspectives, liberal, moderate and conservative, Catholic and Protestant, relative and absolute, were offered regarding the disposition of the case. Correspondents alternately questioned and supported the traditional concepts and authorities. They offered their opinions on everything, from the intellectual direction that society would take in the twentieth century to the philosophical nature of the truth. It was an enlightening, sometimes

⁶ Stephen T. Neese, "Algernon Sidney Crapsey and the Move for Presentment." *Anglican and Episcopal History* (Center Sandwich, NH: Sept. 2001). Vol. LXX No.3.

⁷ Ibid.

extremely contentious debate that intrigued the nation for the better part of two years. The discussion in the popular press underscored the mood of a society in transition, shaken from its traditional moorings and searching for a sanctuary of intellectual repose.

Crapsey's high profile counsel and his willingness to bait the press made the trial a national spectacle. The defense intended to make the trial a philosophical test case for the truth, as they perceived it. They intended to prove that Crapsey's utterances were not terribly dissimilar to those already being taught in Episcopal institutions all over the nation. But the church advocate, John Lord O'Brian, who would later become the assistant attorney general of the nation, was better prepared. He contended that there remained an undeniable "Catholic" concept concerning doctrine. The church acknowledged it and individual opinions regardless of how prevalent they were would never supercede the time-tested formularies of the great church. He caused the ecclesiastical court to remain focused on the matter at hand, the question of whether or not Crapsey had uttered heretical statements contrary to both the traditional formularies and the current ecclesiastical pronouncements of the church. He was convicted. A subsequent appellate review concurred.⁸

Interestingly, though several church journals demurred, most secular newspapers fully supported the findings of the ecclesiastical court. The drama and the ironies, didn't stop there however, as Crapsey made an impassioned plea to the people of his congregation to remain where they were and to continue to affect the church in the reforms he felt were necessary. Many were heartbroken at the loss of their rector and the Crapsey family members were deeply traumatized through it all.

The sum of the scholarship on Crapsey including his self-aggrandizing account ends there.⁹ But Crapsey went on to become a radical, in the strictest sense. He reconstructed the Brotherhood that he had originally established to get the church going and started over again as what he would have described as a secular humanist pastor.¹⁰ His radicalism however got in his way. He eventually became so extreme that those who

⁸ Crapsey's legal team included a popular upstate New York Congressman, and one of the finest defense lawyers of the day.

⁹ This is not solely the opinion of the author but also of Arthur Hunt Crapsey Jr. and other family members. It is the author's opinion that those family members rightly concluded that the autobiography was (perhaps unintentionally) written more as a book justifying his actions and to secure his place in American religious history and less as an exact historical document.

¹⁰ Again, this would have been Crapsey's description.

once supported him, would no longer defend him. They decided he was a detriment rather than the entertaining celebrity he had once been. Many of the same wealthy benefactors who had originally even encouraged his religious heterodoxy, turned their backs on what they considered his social, economic and political aberrations.

He spent his later years writing and walking and working as a parole officer, bringing boys back to the state reform school at Industry outside Rochester, New York. When his age and his conscience could no longer countenance the stress, he retired to write his memoirs. His family and friends took care of him. His wife had become successful as well, by turning a church sewing guild, later a socialist experiment, into a profitable factory. His old friends provided him with an income until his final breath. Only five of Crapsey's children survived him. He buried four others including his marvelously talented daughter who became a well-known poet after her untimely death.

I have attempted to establish through his writings and the historical context in which he lived that studying Algernon Sidney Crapsey is indeed a profitable endeavor. He was significant to both the nation at the turn of the twentieth century and subsequently to those who study cultural and religious history. As his most vocal critics asserted, Crapsey "easily surrendered himself to his intellectual vagaries, and the thing which for the time being appears to be true, he advocates with remarkable eloquence."¹¹ His "intellectual vagaries" indeed produced dire consequences for himself, his family, the church and society itself. On the other hand, I trust his eloquence will somehow shine through the pages of this book as well.

Thus, Crapsey's significance includes his role as both a reflection of and a conduit for the flow of ideas from the intellectual sector to the public at a crucial time in American history. His trial, his very life openly displayed the changing ideals of the society he lived in. Conversely, it also reflected the widening intellectual polarization between opposing segments of the American public. It is imperative to note that studying this churchman brings us face to face with the tenor of the times.

Therefore, documenting the life of Crapsey became an exercise in detailing the changing conventions of late nineteenth, early twentieth century society. His early life reflected the impulses and values of the Anglo-Catholic movement in the Episcopal Church during the nineteenth

¹¹Letter from the Committee of Investigation to Bishop Walker reported in G. Sherman Burrows, *The Diocese of Western New York 1897- 1931* (Buffalo, 1935) pp.124-5.

century. His later life demonstrated the changes that paralleled the transformation of American society through the progressive era of the early twentieth century. America changed warily, yet drastically during this period from a profoundly religious culture to a marginally secular one.

Crapsey was not responsible for instigating those changes. His life, however, influenced, occasioned and expressed them. His educational background was sorely deficient, yet his desire to affect his generation with social and cultural change was compulsive and from this vantagepoint, considerable. In this, he was influenced by an underlying psychological desire to at first, be recognized, and then subsequently attain the goal of religious martyrdom. His biography is a reflection of popular and progressive American culture, as well as religious transformation.

Crapsey was closely coupled to the cultural impulses of his rapidly changing society. His perspective was alternately popular and extreme. Ironically, his limited education and lack of intellectual discipline revealed a special genius about him. He could shake hands with the workingman and speak colloquially about life's deepest mysteries while dining at a table of social elitists. This he did with perfect confidence and ease. He could with candor, correspond with presidential candidates about the important issues of the day, while simultaneously preaching the gospel of socialism to angry mill workers. He was profoundly American. Even his later socially unacceptable radicalism does not alter but rather attests to that fact.

Forever the living irony, Crapsey set out to surmount the religious life including all the precepts and laws of the "straightest sect of his church." But then he ultimately dedicated his life to proving that the old dogma was wrong, by personally demonstrating that one could live morally without the encumbrance of superstitious religiosity. In his religion he was inordinately secular and in his secularity he was profoundly religious. After a life of the most intense and focused religious scrutiny he would subsequently revel in the broadness of a completely open mind. His trial, indeed his life attested to the irony of a changing American ideal, that of the comprehensive character and very nature of cultural truth. His truth was particularistic, relative and rational, in contrast to the absolutist, faith based realities of the past. He was one of the most recognizable men in Rochester during his day, with his characteristic cape and endearing smile. He became a legend that has curiously fallen into obscurity in his adopted home of Rochester, New York. And yet, his life and work continue to reflect both the necessary continuities and the intrinsic differences between the church and society.

Whether he affected the currents of the social history of this nation by influencing people like his fellow Rochesterian, Walter Rauschenbusch, is an interesting question. It is doubtful that Crapsey ever influenced the intellectual direction of Rauschenbusch. But Crapsey's vigor, enthusiasm and earnestness for the liberal cause were unparalleled. Crapsey inspired people. Rauschenbusch could not have lived in Rochester at that time without being affected by the Crapsey debacle. Doubtless, Crapsey inspired Rauschenbusch. Moreover, one must postulate that the religious establishment's reaction to Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* might have been quite different, had Crapsey not already taken the brunt of the reactionary criticism about liberal church issues. Nevertheless, Algernon Sidney Crapsey did have his day in the sun, and would be offended, I am sure, with the consideration that his overall significance lay solely in how he affected the writings of someone else to whom history has been more kind.

It is my desire that both popular society and academic historians might look more closely at Crapsey. Both Crapsey's trial and his life accentuated the impulse for change in our culture. Crapsey's presentment through his conviction brought a cacophony of voices out into the public forum. These voices distinguished the polemic that the contemporary society grappled with. But the question remains, what was the character of that change? Ultimately, as Crapsey maintained, questions of how our culture interprets what it considers true is adjudicated in the court of public opinion.¹² Therefore, in light of all that has passed I submit that the Crapsey case is indicative of the way that American society evinced the challenges of the new century. Ironically, the Crapsey case demonstrated how society both embraced the revolutionary ideas forwarded by the recently commissioned academic sector, as well as rejected the perceived radicalism while revealing the depth of intellectual division in America.

In the end, Algernon Sidney Crapsey was defiantly proud to acknowledge his heresy. Something about his rebellious, yet ethical heritage demanded it. One wonders whether the Crapsey case was not illustrative of, or perhaps even instrumental in the cultural process of unfettering the truth from its absolute intellectual base. Eventually, society, like Crapsey himself, moved well beyond modernism to a post-modern philosophical paradigm. However, one must look carefully at the recent swing back toward conservative social, political, religious and intellectual advances in the scholastic and cultural milieu and ask whether the social advances were truly substantive. Based on his humanistic

¹² Letter of resignation from Crapsey to Bishop Walker, Mon. Nov. 26, 1906.

optimism, Crapsey believed he would be exonerated in the court of public opinion. He may have been by the 1960s but at the turn of this new century one wonders if the historic concept of heresy and other definitively collective concepts have not regained socio-cultural validation.

Algernon Sidney Crapsey was more than anything else an American voice. He was indicative of the generation that produced him. Like America itself, he was sometimes an embarrassment, sometimes deeply emotive and inspirational, occasionally profound, at times repulsively egocentric and unusually kind. His life spanned four score years through some of the most turbulently transitional times in our history. Unable to fathom the rapidity of change and development, his generation was both ingenious in their technological achievements, and simultaneously naïve about the progressive development of the soul of mankind. The First World War finally shattered their optimism.

Ultimately, Crapsey's life illustrates the social demarcation between conflicting ideologies in American culture. Our recent experience with political factions arguing about differing philosophical models clearly relates to the depth of this enduring social polemic. The contested presidency of the year 2000 and the ever-widening dispute about the courts' interpretations of the constitution attests to a similar ongoing divergence in the political realm.

I would argue that Crapsey's life and his heresy case represent the depth of division our culture has experienced over the past century. The ongoing dispute in the courts, schools and other social institutions confirm the intensity of this debate. Crapsey's own writings concerning politics and religion illustrate this persistent argument.

Finally, in a comprehensive and popular way, the Crapsey case represents how American society has struggled with our understanding of the truth. Crapsey's case contemplates both how the truth relates to the doctrines, formularies and scriptures of the historic Christian faith, as well as what philosophical, ideological and religious processes society employs to ascertain it. These questions were argued in the editorial sections of the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, the *New York Times* and an entire host of other newspapers interested in the spectacle of the ecclesiastical court at Batavia. The problems that these authors pondered about their contemporary culture and the future of American society were

philosophically profound at a time when the discussion was not solely constrained to the ivory halls of academia.¹³

Crapsey stood at the precipice of a paradigmatic shift in American social and religious history. He prescribed an interpretive model in his church and society that struggled with modernistic hermeneutics. He recommended the advancement of science through evolutionary theory and the furtherance of democracy through socialism. The result was expulsion, without dishonor. The religious system he engaged demanded it.

Whether exonerated through time by the church that deposed him, or not, his prophecies underscore his enduring significance. He argued that his generation would be the last to find these doctrinal issues important enough to attend to and reluctantly act upon. He was proven wrong within six months after he published his autobiography. But in retrospect, and given the direction of the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first century, perhaps he was somewhat correct after all. Perhaps Crapsey's rebellion has engendered something in the church and society that refuses to be dismissed after Crapsey, after modernism, after the great World Wars, after communism, after the twentieth century, even now. We struggle in our reluctance to call it heresy still, though we know that it is. To some he is a hero of greater proportion than I have undoubtedly depicted. Conversely, he was perhaps an even more tragic figure than I have portrayed as well. If so I don't apologize, on either account. I recognized something in Crapsey's character, even in his incessant self-assurance, that he would likewise never express any regret for. He was who he was. He paved his own path and carried on with a bounce in his stride. He hoped his work would be his enduring testimony. What that truly means, history has already judged. Therefore, like his daughter that passed on before him, he asserted his own historical legacy, whether one agrees with him or not. And so, according to all that remains relative in American religious history, and by his own obtrusive definition, Algernon Sidney Crapsey remains forever the impenitent, "Last of the Heretics."

¹³ See Chapter XIX this manuscript concerning letter to the editor from John Williams of Omaha Nebraska. Taken from *The Churchman* Sat. Feb. 3, 1906 Vol. XCIII No. 5, p. 181.

CHAPTER ONE

“That as Ye Have Heard from the Beginning, Ye Should Walk in it”

When Jacob Crapsey first met the diminutive, dark eyed beauty, Rachel Morris, on a stagecoach ride between Cincinnati and the town of Bethel in Clermont County, Ohio, it was love at first sight. Within a year they married. Rachel was an emotional, fiery woman, the daughter of Thomas Morris, former Senator of Ohio. Her son would later write that she was prone to the moodiness that accompanied the passionate Celtic race. He also considered Jacob as deeply poetic in nature, the kind of man given to the philosophic, interested in history and often idle as a result. Together they raised a large family on the western frontier in Ohio.¹

Algernon Sidney Crapsey was born in Fairmount, Ohio on June 28th, 1847. His eldest brother named him due to his admiration for Algernon Sidney, who fought with Cromwell’s parliamentary forces yet, opposed his dictatorial rule. He subsequently published his famous *Discourses Concerning Government* and was later hanged for treason due to his opposition to the restoration of Charles II.² One can only postulate what effect Sidney’s name had on him as a child. As time progressed, Algernon learned of its significance, living up to his rebellious namesake.³

Algernon believed Crapsey was a derivation of the name Kropps. The paternal side of the family was probably German, though possibly Dutch. His immigrant great- grandfather, Jan Ulric or Ulric Jan, was a tenant blacksmith under the patronage of Van Rensselaer, in New York State, during the Revolutionary War. Crapsey assumed that his great grandfather and his brother, originally came to America as mercenaries employed by

¹ *Unpublished manuscript* of A.S. Crapsey’s autobiography. Arthur Crapsey Jr. Collection. Rare Books Dept. Rush Rhees Library Univ. of Rochester, Rochester, New York. p. 4.

² Algernon Sidney *Discourses Concerning Government* London: Printed for A. Millar, 1751.

³ See Algernon Sidney Crapsey’s autobiography, *The Last of the Heretics* (New York: Alfred Knopf: 1924) pp. 1-2.

King George III. After the War, they stayed on, inspired by the vast, untapped potential of the new land.⁴

Algenon's paternal grandfather was a farmer and a Baptist preacher in the town of Parma, New York, then a small farm town in Genesee County, now a suburb of Rochester. His father Jacob Tompkins Crapsey was named after both the biblical patriarch and the governor of New York State. Crapsey mused that due to the circumstances of his birth, his father was a Calvinist and a Democrat.⁵

In his early days, Jacob would find sometimes-drastic ways, like deliberately cutting his foot with his hoe, to get out of work in the fields. He thoroughly despised the hard life of a farmer. Eventually, he was sent to the Baptist Academy in Canandaigua, in the beautiful Finger Lakes Region of New York State. His parents thought the ministry might be his calling. After completing his course work he proceeded to Oberlin College. Algenon noted that educated men could only work in one of two professions at that time, the ministry or law. But unlike his preacher-father, Jacob was not a believer, which severely limited his vocational options. With graduation, his practice of law began. Unfortunately, his mind was more philosophical than practical. He had a tremendous aversion to completing the work that was necessary to prepare oneself for a case. He was a complex man and a dreamer, but polite and kind.⁶

Due to Jacob's aversion to chastisement, "Mrs. Crapsey," as her husband called her, handled the discipline in the large family. She adored little "Algy," but her emotions would sometimes conflict with her love. He remembered well the beatings, especially those that he considered undeserved. Rachel's home was the center of a busy domestic industry steeped in production. In the early days, there was always abundance and the children were never denied an extra helping of food. Rachel was like her father short and diminutive and thoroughly energetic. But she was also moody and could be dancing and singing at one moment and wandering disheartened through the wilderness the next.⁷

Jacob Crapsey for the most part, spent long hours at his law office near Cincinnati, rarely interacting with his children. At one time, he was appointed as the prosecuting attorney of the county. However, the job was totally inappropriate for him. Jacob never considered punishing people. He never raised his hand or voice at home. He treated his children with

⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 1-2.

⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

respect and always referred to his young son as Algernon, or sir. Algernon sometimes accompanied him on his Sunday walks when his mother let him skip going to church. Jacob's early attempts at making money were, in general, failures. Algernon considered Jacob, too moral to succeed as a lawyer. Algernon noted that he was too deeply concerned with the meaning of justice and personal integrity to consider the necessary prosecution of a case at any cost. One scheme to create a pleasure park in Cincinnati failed and the family suffered the loss of both income and status. He later recovered some of the family's wealth by becoming the legal counselor to a wealthy entrepreneur in the area.⁸

Algernon loved his father in spite of his failings at the legal profession, farming and business. An educated and resolute heathen, Jacob despaired of the passionate preaching style so familiar in the wake of the Second Great Awakening. While the frontier exhortations rapidly changed the western lands into civilized regions, the democratic, homespun Christianity of the Methodists and Baptists was perhaps too familiar for a complex man like Jacob Crapsey.⁹

Algernon sometimes slipped away with him to walk to the dream park that Jacob envisioned for the people of Cincinnati. They would get "Bavarian beer and black bread and sausages and cheese and sauerkraut and escape to a high place, above that reserved portion of wilderness, to eat and drink and dream." Jacob admired Byron who was then at the peak of his fame. He remembered him "standing on the edge of the ledge of rock, his hat in his hand, his shirt open at the neck, his blond hair blowing in the wind, reciting the opening lines of the *Giour*:

*He who hath bent him oer the dead,
Ere the first day death hath fled,
And marked the mild angelic air,
The rapture of repose that's there.*¹⁰

It was his maternal grandfather however, Thomas Morris that Algernon idolized. Rachel's father migrated from the mountains of Virginia to the Ohio Valley because of his intense hatred for the institution of slavery. He was of Welsh origin and like his daughter, he was given to

⁸ A.S. Crapsey, *Manuscript*, p. 31, see also Crapsey, *Heretics*, pp. 20, 24.

⁹ For more on the frontier democracy and preaching style of the Second Great Awakening see, Nathan O. Hatch *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989).

¹⁰ A.S. Crapsey, *Manuscript*, pp. 25-9.

violent and passionate outbursts. He was also a devoutly religious man.¹¹ He was a highly moral man driven to challenge the status quo. He started out his career as a lawyer, became a State Supreme Court Justice and eventually a United States Senator from Ohio. He later ran for Vice-President in 1844, with James Birney, on the Liberty Party ballot.¹²

Young Algernon identified deeply with his grandfather. It was his grandfather's wealth that sustained them when his father's commercial plans nearly brought them to the brink of financial ruin. It was his grandfather who had truly made something special out of his life. His grandfather challenged the establishment and paid the price for it. To Algernon, "he was a seer, a prophet, a hero and a martyr." He was a self-made man, self-educated and the only one responsible for his wealth and success. Moreover, he was prophetic in his early anti-slavery stance, a far seeing hero who pushed for the causes he believed in and eventually he was a martyr because of his personal honor and veracity. Algernon was short like his grandfather and filled with the same kinds of passion and energy. He became a political pariah, persecuted for his untarnished integrity."¹³

At a time when the general populace still considered abolitionists as radical troublemakers, Morris stood for his personal convictions. In a fiery answer to a typical Henry Clay speech, seeking compromise between freedom and slavery, Morris was unbending and relentless in his assault upon the immoral institution. He defended,

the right of petition against it, advocating its abolition in the District of Columbia, calling it a foul thing, cruel to blacks, degrading to whites, a violation of human rights; a contradiction of the fundamental principles of the American Republic, and repugnant to the Word and will of God.

He concluded with the words, "The Negro shall yet be free!" Due to the agitation of the southern senators Morris was soon barred from the

¹¹ Crapsey, *Heretics* p. 3.

¹² James Gillespie Birney wrote a book in 1840 that inflamed religious passions entitled, *The American Churches, The Bulwarks of American Slavery* (Concord, New Hampshire, P. Pillsbury, 1885). Birney moved his law practice from Alabama to Cincinnati, Ohio in the 1830s. He was the editor of one of the first anti-slavery publications in the area, published originally in 1836, *The Philanthropist*.

¹³ Morris's relationship with Birney and the anti-church content of many of his writings contributed to his estrangement from the Methodist church. Crapsey, *Heretics*, pp. 2-4.

Democratic Party. He was similarly excommunicated from the Methodist Church. Without the backing of his party he was eventually expelled from the Senate. He was regarded as a social radical, beyond the pale of political and religious orthodoxy.¹⁴

But Algernon considered him a man beyond his time. He epitomized the explosive character of the growing nation, groping for an identity worthy of its idealistic youth. Morris exemplified all that was just and right about the nation. Algernon realized that time vindicated his grandfather. He was a leader of perhaps the most important movement the American nation would ever know. Yet, for standing up for what he believed he was even deprived of a burial in the Christian church of his choice.¹⁵

His older brother Marshall's death also made a lasting impression on young Algernon. He truly venerated Marshall, and waited upon him wholeheartedly during the time of his sickness. His death devastated Algernon and the rest of the family. Because they were not members of a church, they called in a stranger to officiate at the funeral. The austere, distinguished man preached the gospel in its entirety including the plan of salvation. He called for those present to profess Christ openly as, only those who were unashamed would inherit the Kingdom. Conversely, he announced that the unbeliever would be constrained to hell. Pointing to Algernon's dead brother lying in the coffin he declared, "As this young man has made no open confession of Christ before men, we cannot expect that he should enter the kingdom of heaven." He then admonished the mourners to make their candid professions unless they wanted the same fate of the lack of God's mercy to happen to them. At this point Mrs. Crapsey became so distressed that she actually fainted over her son's coffin.¹⁶

In contrast to the fire and brimstone approach of many of the frontier preachers Algernon appreciated the piety and quiet dignity of the Roman Catholic churches in Cincinnati. He pondered about the dignified grace of the inhabitants of the convents and monasteries, more than visible to

¹⁴ Other writings about Thomas Morris include, William Henry Brisbane's *An Eulogium of the Life and Character of the Late Hon. Thomas Morris* (Cincinnati: L- Hommedieu, 1845). His son Benjamin Franklin Morris also wrote a book in 1856 entitled, *The Life of Thomas Morris, Pioneer and Long a Legislator of Ohio, and U.S. Senator from 1833- 1839* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys and Overand, 1856).

¹⁵ Crapsey, *Heretics*, p. 4.

¹⁶ A.S. Crapsey, *Manuscript* pp. 53- 4.

young Algernon in a city teeming with Irish and German immigrants. Their magnificent cathedrals stood in stark contrast to the plain Protestant churches. He considered Cincinnati, the Boston of the west due to its emphasis on scholarship and philosophical inquiry. Moreover, it was the German population who were primarily Roman Catholic that contributed to its reputation as an intellectual and cultural center. Crapsey noted with pride how Cincinnati became the home of America's first astronomical observatory in 1843."¹⁷

Crapsey associated intellectual achievement with devout religion from his youth. He developed a great love and deep appreciation for the beauty and the mystery of the Roman Catholic Church. Crapsey listened to the calls of the monastery bells from matins to compline and watched as the dutiful friars walked through the graveyards reading their offices. He was overtaken with a deep and lasting sense of reverence and respect for the dedicated priests of the Roman Catholic Church. He respected the devout nature of the Catholic religion, the reputation for erudition and its complicity with art and natural science. He would later write,

I am sure I owed my future calling to the ministry of the church to the impressions made upon my soul by these devout friars.¹⁸

Nevertheless, like other young men, the practical matters of life occupied Algernon's mind principally. Due in part to his father's failing practice, he quit school at the age of eleven and secured a job as a cash boy in a dry goods store, much to the consternation of his mother who would not hear of the grandson of Thomas Morris working as a cash boy. His father reacted differently, "You had better let the boy do what he wants to do, Mrs. Crapsey," he said. "As for school, life is the best school of all, and your father, Senator Morris, began his life as a squatter, making his living by the work of his own hands. It seems to me that Algernon has shown enterprise and decision. We had better let him have his own way." He kept the job at the store for two years until his father's practice suddenly recovered. Jacob was hired in a lawsuit (interestingly known as the Whitewater case) that involved millions of dollars. A Colonel West, his only client and a close friend, retained him. Algernon returned to

¹⁷ Crapsey was wrong to assert that the Cincinnati Observatory was the nation's oldest. The United States Naval Observatory is actually older. Crapsey, *Heretics*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁸ Crapsey, *Heretics*, p.16.

school at the advice of his parents only to realize that he was now uncomfortable with his academic surroundings being older than the other boys. Therefore, he accepted a position arranged for him at a hardware factory owned by one of his cousins. Because he was often idle and chided as being worthless, as one of the co-owners soon let him know, Algernon quit and hastened to the call of the military.¹⁹

Algernon was barely fourteen years old in August of 1862, and he was small for his age. The Civil War was raging and the northern forces were being frustrated at every turn. Algernon was determined to serve his nation for the cause of freedom. The words of his grandfather echoed in his heart, "The Negro shall yet be free!" He would do his part no matter how small he was. He was too little to be a line soldier and he rejected outright the idea of being a drummer boy, but when he suggested that he might play the bugle, they agreed to take him. But there were no bugles to be had, and young Algernon was elated that he was now a part of the regular ranks.²⁰

Under General Rosecrans, the Union army pursued Bragg throughout Kentucky. The weather started out warm but worsened as the fall months wore on. The men were exposed to the harsh elements continuously, some without the proper equipment. As the weather turned colder, the marches became a way of maintaining one's body heat and keeping warm. On one long march in freezing weather, Algernon was maintaining the pace on the outside of the formation. An officer spied the young lad, and in an act of misplaced benevolence ordered the young trooper to be seated on his horse while he took his place in the ranks. This was the wrong thing to do for the young soldier, and in due time, he literally froze in place on the horse. He was lowered from his horse, taken to the surgeon's tent and ultimately to the hospital tent where he stayed until Christmas. He was finally sent to Nashville, where they diagnosed him with a "hypertrophied heart." He thought that his real problem was pneumonia, but whatever they wanted to call it was all right with him as long as it meant he could now go home. He was discharged and sent on the long journey back to Cincinnati.²¹

His mother was shocked at his appearance. He recovered slowly but surely. But being so completely bored at the tedium of civilian life and the regimen of the home, when his father offered to have him accompany him to work he jumped at the chance. The boredom of the home was only

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 21-6.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 32-5.

surpassed by the monotony of his father's office. Nevertheless, with a library in the building below his father's office, Algernon had the opportunity to delve into the world of literature. Through the works of Scott, Dickens, Irving, Macaulay, Thackeray, Prescott and others Algernon received his chance to discover the world through reading. It was by sheer accident that he stumbled upon the book that would lead him into the profession that he would choose for the better part of his life. Ironically, it was this same Bible, which he would later deny in the literal sense that eventuated his deposal from his vocation.²²

Walking into Christ Church one night, initially to escape the freezing weather, but perhaps with a bit of curiosity motivating him, young Algernon was immediately overwhelmed by the pious ambiance of the place. He had never been in an Episcopal Church before and the environment immediately captivated him. It was Sexagesima Sunday, the second Sunday before Lent. The liturgy, the regalia and the trappings of the church overwhelmed him. The dignified manner of the service, the ministerial garb and the way the priests read the Psalms all combined to make the reading from Jeremiah's thirty-sixth chapter an unforgettable experience. The devout atmosphere created a life long impression on him.²³

Due to the decorous nature of the church and the ministers, Crapsey could have hardly suspected that the church was actually in an unfortunate state. Christ Church was founded by the missionary efforts of Philander Chase on the eighteenth day of May, 1817. The first rector was the Reverend Samuel Johnston, who served from March 1818 until August 1827. The church at the time that Crapsey attended his first service was probably between rectors, as the previous rector, the Reverend Kingston Goddard, had not been able to get along well with the vestry. He tendered his resignation on the nineteenth of March 1862. The next rector, the Reverend John W. McCarty did not take office until Easter Sunday, April 3, 1863. Crapsey's enchantment with the outward religiosity in the Protestant Episcopal Church betrayed his naiveté at the problems the church was experiencing between the vestry and the clergy.²⁴

He became "a devoted disciple of the Bible," in part due to his curious introduction to it on that frosty night. However, his fascination was not with it as a venerated holy oracle, but rather as a great literary work. His

²² Ibid., pp. 38-9.

²³ Ibid., pp.40-2.

²⁴ William Henry Venable *A Centennial History of Christ Church, Cincinnati: 1817- 1917* (Cincinnati: Stewart & Kidd Co., 1918) pp. 49-54.

favorite book was that of the prophet Isaiah. He could read the Bible and find inspiration, but it was a different kind of inspiration than normally referred to by other converts. The inspiration that Algernon received was more like the enlightenment that one experienced by being captivated with a great novel, or being deeply touched by poetry. Crapsey considered the night he walked into Christ Church, Cincinnati, to escape the onslaught of the cold, as the hour of his conversion. But, unlike the testimonies of other spiritually changed men, there was no deep bewailing of the life he had lived, or repentance for his sin. There was no lifting of his hands towards the heavens for the amazing grace that God had provided, nor kneeling at the foot of the cross in submission to the will of the Father with everlasting gratitude for the work of the Son. Somehow, God the Son was not even present in his initial spiritual experience. If one could consider it a transformation at all, Algernon Sidney Crapsey's was of a very special kind. He was converted to what the early Protestant reformers had disparaged of so adamantly; to formal religion, and organized religiosity. He explained,

I looked back on that Sexagesima Sunday night as the date of my conversion. The religion of the great prophets became my religion.²⁵

With the passing of the seasons came the longing again for adventure. After answering an advertisement in a local paper, he spent the next six months as a storekeeper at a salt yard in West Virginia. The news from Gettysburg and Vicksburg encouraged him. The prospect of his grandfather's words coming true filled him with hopeful anticipation. However, talk of the nation's political situation was so volatile that it was avoided at all cost. Although West Virginia had seceded from the state of Virginia and joined the Union, the provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation allowed for the institution of slavery to continue in states that hadn't seceded. The practice lasted until the passing of the thirteenth amendment. Rude language by the salt workers about the exploitation of black women filled Algernon with a sense of righteous consternation. Thus, Algernon partook in the salt workers community without ever really being a part of it. He related this sense of disconnection in his description of a funeral he observed of a poor white man, who, like the blacks in the area participated in a religious style of worship that he perceived as contemptible.

²⁵ Crapsey, *Heretics*, p. 42.

The religion of the poor whites and of the slaves was orgiastic, an emotional indulgence ending in a debauch. I recall a funeral conducted by a Baptist minister with a feeling of grotesque horror. The dead man had been killed by a falling tree; he was in his young manhood and was widely known in the mountains. His funeral was held after nightfall. People came from far and wide, lighting their way with tar torches. The scene of the funeral was the mountain-side illuminated by a bonfire; nothing could have been more sublime and nothing was ever more diabolical. The preacher, half naked, jumped and screamed; the mourners filled the air with inarticulate wailings; whiskey was served out of buckets with a ladle, and a drunken orgy closed the scene. I can never think of that night without a chill of horror. It was a degradation of man and the degradation of the gods; below this neither man nor god could go and continue to exist.²⁶

By the beginning of 1864, Algernon was back in Cincinnati contemplating his next move. He took a bookkeeper's job at a printer's office and to remedy his lack of mathematical and organizational skills he enrolled in a night school course. While employed there, he walked past many of the theaters playing in Cincinnati. Forewarned of their sinful content he entered them surreptitiously at first, but soon developed an abiding taste for the theater, especially Shakespeare. After watching James E. Murdock in the role of Hamlet he was again truly inspired, and eventually placed Shakespeare in the company with Jesus and Isaiah as his great inspirations.²⁷

Shortly thereafter they received word of President Lincoln's assassination. His mother reacted almost as emotionally as she had when Marshall had died and the rest of the family wept as well. His father sadly feared the vengeance that might transpire. The family and the nation mourned for Abraham Lincoln for the next seven days. Crapsey remarked, "by his martyrdom he ascended to the rank of saviour of mankind." After being fired from the job as a bookkeeper at the printer's office, he was asked to fill in for six months for his uncle Franklin in the Dead Letter Office, in Washington, D.C. He was to substitute for his uncle who was in the process of writing a biography about his father, Algernon's grandfather and hero Thomas Morris.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 47-8.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

²⁸ The problem with this scenario, as it is related by Crapsey in his autobiography, is that Benjamin Franklin Morris wrote the book about his father in 1856, not 1865. It is obvious that Algernon at the age of 9 or 10 years old would not have

Algernon identified deeply with the maternal side of his family. His uncle Franklin was a new side Presbyterian minister who had authored several books on social and religious affairs. Two other maternal uncles served in the U.S. Congress, Jonathan David Morris who had spent nearly twenty years of his life as a clerk in the Supreme Court eventually served two terms in Congress. Crapsey realized the successful heights that his two uncles had achieved, and yet it was his other uncle, Isaac Newton Morris that Crapsey considered truly successful. Isaac became a lawyer at the age of twenty-three. At twenty-eight he declined an appointment as the Secretary of the State of Illinois. One year later he became the president of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Company. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1846. He became a Congressman but eventually left Congress while remaining as commissioner of the Union Pacific Railroad. He considered his uncle Franklin, monotonous and his other uncle Jonathan was rarely mentioned. However, at his young age, he related to the precocious, energetic successes of his uncle Isaac.²⁹

Algernon was thrilled to go to the nation's capital but soon found himself in "the morgue of defunct human correspondence." Washington in 1865 was messy and ironic in its character. He observed that the streets were filthy and mostly unpaved and there were ill arranged, untidy houses with the impoverished filth of the Negro quarters befouling the alleys between the streets. And yet, in the same area stood the majestic Capitol, the towering Treasury building, the grand Patent Office, the subtle White House and other marvelous examples of fine, classical architecture. He had an easy job, working often a total of five and one-half hours while being paid for eight. His fellow public servants were just as crude as the salt workers of the mountains of West Virginia and he had a hard time adjusting to their tobacco spitting habits and vulgar ways.³⁰

As his six-month term came to a close, his uncle Isaac Morris, the man that he truly respected, visited him. Uncle Isaac suggested that he should go to northeast to New York City rather than subscribe to the current popular suggestion to "go west young man." He figured that at the vigorous rate that New York City was growing that opportunity would

gone to Washington to work. Crapsey most likely went to Washington to work for his uncle for six months, but his explanation of why he went must be considered suspect to error. Crapsey was 77 years old when his autobiography was published and he probably remembered the reason for his substitution incorrectly.

²⁹ See Karen Alkalay- Gut, *Alone in the Dawn* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988) pp. 22-4.

³⁰ Crapsey, *Heretics*, p. 57.