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DEAN FREIDAY, ROBERT BARCLAY, AND JOHN CASSIAN

MICHAEL BIRKEL

One of Dean Freiday's enduring gifts is the way he inspired greater attention to Robert Barclay, including Barclay's Latin opus. In 1979, for example, Dean Freiday published an article "Barclay's Reply to Arnoldus" in *Quaker History*,¹ in which he examined a short treatise composed in Latin, still unpublished in English, in which Barclay responded in kind to a attack on his *Theses Theologicae* by Nikolaus Arnold, a Calvinist theologian at the Academy in Franeker in West Frisia in the Netherlands. Another legacy from Dean Freiday is the way he lived an ecumenical life, particularly in relationship with Roman Catholics.² This article is a tribute to both of these gifts, looking at Robert Barclay, including the Latin edition of his *Apologia*, and exploring connections with his Jesuit education and an early Christian writer whom he likely encountered there, John Cassian. I shared the insights of the work behind this essay some years ago with Dean Freiday, who encouraged me to write up my findings. It seems fitting to do so in a collective memorial to him.

In his *Apology*, in the proposition on Scripture, Robert Barclay offers a description of how Scripture works that some have found as quintessentially Quaker.³ A closer reading based on the Latin original of Barclay's work, however, reveals echoes of John Cassian, whose monastic writings of the early fifth century Barclay may have encountered while studying as a young man at the Jesuit Scots College in Paris.

Let's begin with Robert Barclay's words, noting his use of the words "fulfillment" and "mirror":

God hath seen meet that herein we should see as in a looking-glass the conditions and experiences of the saints of old, that finding our experiences to answer to theirs, we might be time more confirmed and comforted and our hope of obtaining the same end strengthened.... This is the great work of the Scriptures and their service to us, that we may witness them fulfilled in us.⁴

“Condition” and “experience” can strike us as especially Quaker words. Direct spiritual experience, not doctrinal hearsay, has always been a hallmark of Quakerism. As for the word “condition,” George Fox’s heart leapt for joy when, after his strenuous search for human spiritual guidance that had, in his estimation, failed completely, he “heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition.’” Shortly thereafter, George Fox has a powerful opening in which he sees the nature of all manner of evil within. When he cries out, asking, “Why should I be thus, seeing I was never addicted to commit those evils?” the answer comes, “that it was needful I should have a sense of all conditions, how else should I speak to all conditions; and in this I saw the infinite love of God.”⁵ Here he echoes the temptations of Jesus, whose condition he mirrors. To use Robert Barclay’s expression, that particular passage of Scripture is being fulfilled in George Fox.

The word “fulfillment” merits closer examination. The English version of the *Apology* may not fully convey a nuance that is evident in the Latin original. There the word for “fulfill” is not “comple,” from which our word “complete” is derived. The word that Robert Barclay chose is “implere.” The fulfillment in the reader’s life is an implementation or instance of fulfillment, not the apex of realization for all time. We participate in the larger drama described in the words of Scripture, rather than Scripture finding its ultimate purpose only in us. Even with this adjustment, Robert Barclay’s words still sound very Quaker.

But to sound typically Quaker need not mean that the ideas were invented by Friends. Barclay’s words sound remarkably similar to a passage from John Cassian, a Latin-writing monk whose works exerted a powerful influence on the spirituality of the Christian West.⁶ In addition to his own merit as a spiritual writer, John Cassian was endorsed by the *Rule of Benedict*, which recommended reading his works.⁷ His most important writings are his *Institutes on the Monastic Life* and his *Conferences*.⁸ The latter are framed as twenty-four interviews with monastic teachers of the Egyptian desert, and they treat a wide variety of topics pertaining to the ascetical life, including the goals of the monastic life, discernment, temptation, spiritual knowledge, grace, friendship, and prayer.⁹ It is in the tenth *Conference*, on prayer, that John Cassian discusses reading Scripture in ways that are similar to Robert Barclay’s. Here Cassian focuses particularly on the Psalms

because one who lives the monastic life encounters them each day in the communal prayers of the hours, as well as in private devotions.

...receiving into oneself all the conditions [described] in the Psalms, one will begin to sing them not as if composed by the prophet but as if brought forth from one's own self as one's own prayer, produced by deep compunction of the heart; and one will surely consider them as directed at oneself, and understand that their verses were not only fulfilled by and in the prophet in ages past, but that they are being acted out and fulfilled daily in oneself...We find all these conditions expressed in the Psalms, so then we see, as in the clearest mirror, what is said to us, and we have a deeper understanding of it...And so we enter into the meaning of the text not based simply on the words themselves but also on our own experience.¹⁰

The parallels are striking. The concepts of Scripture as a mirror for the spiritual condition of the reader and of Scriptures being fulfilled in the reader occur very close to one another in both texts. The focus on the inward disposition is also found in both texts. John Cassian draws a distinction between “complere” and “implere,” using the former to refer to fulfillment in the Biblical era and the latter in the same sense as Robert Barclay did to refer to the experience in the life of the reader. Is all this a mere coincidence, or might Barclay have read Cassian (whom he does not cite as a source)?

As mentioned earlier, Barclay spent four years studying at the Jesuit Scots College in Paris,¹¹ a school in exile for Catholics, since Scotland was officially Protestant in that day. The principal of the Scots College was another Robert Barclay, an uncle for whom the younger Robert was named. The adolescent Robert Barclay returned to Scotland in obedience to the dying wishes of his Scottish Presbyterian mother, who feared that her son would become a life-long Catholic.¹² Cassian was a popular spiritual writer among Jesuits from the time of their founder, Ignatius Loyola, and Cassian appears on the list of books recommended for the master of novices from the late sixteenth century onward.¹³ So it is quite possible that Barclay read Cassian, but whether there was a direct influence or not, we can see the parallels in their approach to reading Scripture. The Bible serves as a mirror for the soul, by which the reader discovers that the spiritual condition of the Biblical figures corresponds to her or his own. To read Scripture is to read one's own story because it is fulfilled in the reader's own inward life. Note that both writers are speaking not so much about

a theological doctrine of spiritual authority as an interior experience. John Cassian greatly influenced how European Christians read the Bible from his day in the early 400s throughout the next millennium and beyond. Yet his approach to reading Scripture is more an attitude than a fixed method. Later centuries were to witness a growing interest with step-by-step methods, especially in the twelfth-century flowering of spiritual life and writing in Western Europe.¹⁴

Dean Freiday was pleased when I told him of this discovery. An earlier generation, shaped by its historical context (as we all unavoidably and often unconsciously are) and a tendency among many traditional Protestants to keep a distance from Roman Catholicism, might have underplayed such a connection between Robert Barclay and John Cassian via his Jesuit education, but Dean Freiday, moved by the openness to ecumenical dialogue initiated by the Second Vatican Council, embraced and celebrated such relationships. In recent years Jesuit scholars such as Michael Sheeran have learned from Friends.¹⁵ In return, Friends can acknowledge their debt to the Society of Jesus through the introduction to John Cassian that Robert Barclay received at the Jesuit Scots College of Paris.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dean Freiday, "Barclay's Reply to Arnoldus," *Quaker History* 68 (Spring 1979): 20-32.
- 2 A minute of appreciation for Dean Freiday's work from the Christian and Interfaith Relations Committee of Friends General Conference can be found at <<http://www.fgcquaker.org/circ/freiday_appreciation.html>>.
- 3 For an appreciation of Robert Barclay's approach to the Bible, see Henry Joel Cadbury, "A Quaker Approach to the Bible" (Greensboro, NC: Guilford College, 1953), especially his approval of what he calls "Operation Mirror," referring to the passage from the *Apology* quoted below.
- 4 Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition 3, Section 5.
- 5 John Nickalls, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 11, 19.
- 6 For good studies of John Cassian, see Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968); Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (Oxford: University Press, 1978); Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (Oxford: University Press, 1998). Mary Margaret Funk's *Thoughts Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2002) brings key teachings of John Cassian to a contemporary reader with great effectiveness.
- 7 *Rule of Benedict*, chapter 73: And also the *Conferences* and the *Institutes* [that is, the major works of John Cassian] and the *Lives of the Fathers*, as also the *Rule* of our holy father Basil: what else are they but instruments of virtue for rightly living and obedient monks? (my translation)

- 8 Boniface Ramsey has published recent translations of both texts in the Ancient Christian Writers Series of the Newman Press, *The Conferences* in 1997 and *The Institutes* in 2000.
- 9 Robert Barclay, it seems, would have appreciated John Cassian's anti-predestinarian theology, but he does not make use of it in the *Apology*.
- 10 Iohannes Cassianus, *Conlationes XXIII*, edited by Michael Petschenig, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vol. XIII, Par. II (Vienna, 1886), 304-305 (my translation).
- 11 See W. A. McNeill, "Documents Illustrative of the History of the Scots College, Paris," *The Innes Review* 15 (1964): 66-85.
- 12 D. Elton Trueblood, *Robert Barclay* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 26-27.
- 13 Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice, A Historical Study*, edited by George E. Ganss, translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964), 216.
- 14 See, for example, the English translation of the *Scala Claustralium* of Guigo II, Prior of the Grand Chartreuse, *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, edited and translated by James Walsh and Edmund Colledge (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978). This text is widely regarded as a classical articulation of the method of meditative reading known as *lectio divina*.
- 15 See Michael Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1983).