

JAMES NAYLER: ANTINOMIAN OR PERFECTIONIST?*

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Was James Nayler mad? Grandiose, neurotic, depressed, borderline? Did he suffer from a Messiah complex? Was he seduced by his crazed female admirers? Did he go over the edge, commit the unthinkable sin of blasphemy, and disgrace and discredit the Quaker movement? These questions have haunted and disconcerted Quaker historians for over 300 years.

Leo Damrosch rethinks these 'juicy' questions and many other related issues surrounding the early history of the Quaker movement: the role of Scripture, their so-called antinomianism, mysticism and 'illumination', the extent of their 'absolute' individualism, leadership and power conflicts, as well as their political agenda—questions that have continually perplexed and often divided historians. By using the drama of Nayler's life as the focal point of his study and the dramatic lens in which to view Quaker origins, Damrosch develops interpretations of early Quaker history that challenge many widely-held assumptions and cast new light on early Quaker beliefs and behavior. He is bold enough to challenge Quaker hagiography surrounding George Fox (though not the first to do so—Melvin Endy and the essays in Michael Mullett's *New Light on George Fox* have already tarnished Fox's halo) as well to challenge Christopher Hill's radical socialist analysis. In his fascinating study of the most Christ-like figure in Quaker history he uncovers a portrait of the early Quaker movement which few of us ever imagined existed. Although coming to this work from the field of literature he reconstructs and documents his work like a meticulous

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historian. But with his literary perspective and flair, he also brings to us a creative and innovative study that is as gripping to read as a good novel.

Antinomianism vs Perfect Obedience to Christ

Surprisingly, I found myself in partial agreement with Damrosch's main thesis: 'What was diagnosed as "madness", even by fellow Quakers, was at a deep level an imaginative understanding of principles that all antinomians, and many orthodox, claimed to accept.' My objection to his thesis is his use of the label 'antinomian' applied to Nayler and the nascent Quaker movement. If the word *antinomians* could be changed to *perfectionists* I would be in basic agreement with his thesis. Nayler and the earliest Quakers adopted a radical understanding of the most frequently-used metaphor of the Christian life, the *imitatio Christi*.

Damrosch defines antinomianism as: 'the replacement of an external law by an internal spiritual one'. That is not antinomian in its usual sense, which regards any external law as nonbinding. Early Quakers did not discard the biblical moral code. Damrosch points out they were more rigidly moralistic than the Puritans, which makes it difficult to cast Quakers in the category of antinomians. The replacement of an external law by an internal one is the Christian understanding of the New Covenant (which Nayler understood quite well). Based on the text of Jer. 31.33-34 (which Nayler often referred to in his writings):

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'know the Lord' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more.

If antinomianism means replacing an external law by an internal one, then this text is the antinomian manifesto. Damrosch claims that Nayler understood his position as antinomian, by claiming the law as spiritual, but I am not convinced Nayler would have used the term antinomian to describe his belief. But he and all Quakers readily employed the term perfection. Their Puritan opponents may have viewed Quakers as antinomian but it seems unlikely they would have accepted for themselves a label that would identify them as heretics.

Damrosch admits that the Quaker position on law is that it is 'still binding but now it is possible to live up to its demands instead of endlessly failing'. If the law is still binding, antinomianism would be a contradiction. I think the more accurate term is *perfectionism*. Perhaps I'm splitting hairs with this terminology, but they are important hairs, because the trajectory is very different. The use of antinomian is to side with their opponents, and place early Quakers outside the limits of Orthodoxy. I would argue that early Quaker beliefs never step beyond the bounds of Orthodoxy. They may have stretched the boundary as far as possible in some aspects of their thought (just as the Medieval mystics did), but they did not cross over into heterodoxy, despite the accusations of their opponents. Early Quakers were radically Orthodox in the same way that mystics are radically Orthodox.

The concept of perfection, the possibility of living up to and obeying the commands of Christ, was a key Quaker belief, perhaps their defining belief. Even when they became 'extraordinarily different' in later periods as Damrosch contends, perfectionism continued to be a major tenet, but it was lived out differently than in its earliest phase.

Perfectionism *unlike* antinomianism, is an ancient Christian belief, accepted within the Orthodox tradition. In Roman Catholicism Christian perfection means the attainment of holiness or sainthood and within the Eastern Orthodox tradition it is known as 'deification' or theosis. Therefore when Damrosch contends that Nayler's actions were an imaginative understanding of *Orthodox* principles I am in basic agreement. But perfection (or deification, to use the Orthodox term) was not a belief accepted by the Puritans or most 'Protestants' in seventeenth-century England. As unpopular as many Quaker beliefs were at that time, perfectionism was the most unpopular, and the most discounted. Perfectionism was identified with Catholicism, with the hated Jesuits, and as mysticism or monasticism, all abhorrent to seventeenth-century Puritans. Nayler's 'imaginative understanding' was the principle of perfectionism 'embodied'.

Throughout the High Middle Ages, the *imitatio Christi*, was the highest ideal to which the devout, the monk, nun, or saint, could ascribe. The *Devotio Moderna* movement of late Medieval Christendom, popularized the concept, and made available even to the masses of ordinary folk, the Monastic spirituality of Perfection. *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, became the most widely-read devotional book in Western Christianity. So the highest form of spirituality, the Imitation of Christ, complete obedience to and identification with Christ, became the goal of the most devout. The desire to so fully conform to Christ that Christ

becomes the 'rule of life' was internalized in the earliest Quaker movement and manifested in its most visible form by Nayler's drama.¹ I wonder, how really different was Nayler's identification with Christ by his imitation of the entry into Jerusalem than the imitation of Christ by the reception of the stigmata by saints such as St Francis? Nayler became a blasphemer, though he could have as easily become a saint, depending on how his act would be interpreted by those who witnessed it. The line between saint and heretic, has always been a thin one. When Damrosch claims that Nayler made literal what was normally figurative, I would completely agree. Though I do not see this in terms of antinomianism, but rather a radically orthodox perfectionism—a complete identification with the suffering Christ. Even Nayler's defense became a continuation of his imitation of Christ in answering much like Christ would have answered his accusers. He never really renounced his identification with Christ nor confessed to blasphemy. After all Christ was accused of blasphemy as well, so the accusation only reinforced his identification. His interrogation became a further means of enacting Christ's passion. Although we can never know for sure, it seems highly likely that Nayler ultimately desired martyrdom. After all, that would be the supreme identification with Christ. The spirituality of martyrdom in the first three centuries of the church became the highest form of spirituality. The martyr would instantly see the beatific vision and be taken into heaven. Anabaptists also had a strong spirituality of martyrdom and Nayler's spirituality corresponds closely to the Anabaptist model. I would suggest that Nayler's greatest pain and disappointment resulted from his being tortured and imprisoned, but not martyred. Herein lies his great disillusionment. He could not attain the perfect identification with Christ in martyrdom which he sought. It seems quite possible that Nayler reenacted the entry into Jerusalem as a preparation for his martyrdom.

What is most surprising about the Nayler story is not its interpretation in the seventeenth century, nor his repudiation among Quakers at that time, but the sympathy and high esteem in which later Quakers and others have held him. Nayler was not your typical 'Messiah complex' madman. His humility and meekness were far too genuine. He elicits both genuine sympathy and perplexing curiosity precisely because he was indeed so Christ-like. In the final dénouement of his drama with Fox, Nayler

1. Nayler's use of the phrase 'Christ is the *rule* of life', a recurring phrase in Anabaptist writings, also counters the charge of antinomiansm.

becomes the humble, penitent saint, and Fox the arrogant, unforgiving, authoritarian 'Popelike' figure who offers Nayler his foot to kiss.

I would argue that Nayler's action represented not a 'coherent context of antinomian symbolism' but the embodied symbolism of perfection, or holiness, in the imitation of Christ in his passion. I would agree with Damrosch that Nayler did not 'literally or personally think he was the Messiah', nor did his followers. But rather he was acting out the *imitatio Christi*, in a way not so very different from the imitation of Christ in his poverty and chastity of the Franciscan mendicants who lived the life of wandering beggars.

Other foreshadowings of Nayler's action in slightly different form can be seen in the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. They celebrated the Lord's supper as a vivid reenactment of Jesus' last meal as well as an anticipation of his second coming. Adult Baptism to many Anabaptists was a reenactment of Jesus' baptism—identifying with Christ's death and resurrection. (But it was an illegal act, and they were condemned as heretics for doing so).

Michael Servetus, the Unitarian Anabaptist, insisted on baptism by immersion in the Rhine river when he was 30 years of age in literal imitation of Jesus' own baptism. Servetus was burned at the Stake in Geneva by Calvinists.

Since Quakers practised neither the Lord's supper to imitate Jesus' last meal nor adult baptism by immersion to imitate Jesus' own baptism—one potent drama left for Nayler to ritually embody his holiness would be the entry into Jerusalem as a reenactment of a major event in Jesus' life.

Did Nayler have a political agenda?

I find myself agreeing in part with Damrosch's assessment that Nayler was not a social revolutionary in the manner portrayed by Christopher Hill, but more like the imaginative mystic William Blake. Nayler was essentially a mystic who experienced a *unitus spiritus* (one spirit—union with Christ) so literally that he felt compelled to enact his spiritual identity as a sign. But being a public act, it was also a political act. In those times politics and religion could not be separated. Although Quakers may not have had an explicitly intentional political agenda, they could not help being political, for any religious act was a political act. Since Quakers were bringing the Kingdom of God to their contemporaries, they were also urging a new social, cultural, and political agenda into their world. At least some aspects of their apocalyptic language was literally political, in the way Jesus'

language was political in his time—so political he was crucified as a subversive. In the same sense Paul's message and language was political and a threat to the Hellenistic world, which is why he was imprisoned. At Ephesus he was disrupting the trade in idols. His purpose was not primarily to displace the idol merchants but the reality of that consequence was clearly linked to his preaching.

So, I cannot agree with Damrosch that the Quaker message was apolitical and their protest was merely symbolic. But I do applaud Damrosch's purpose in his book to do justice to the religious concepts and not try to translate them into political statements or what they 'really' meant in light of modern thought. Though his aims are 'entirely secular' as he admits, he accepts Nayler's actions as religious actions, actions of a devout and deeply spiritual man, whose intentions however interpreted by the public and the authorities, were meant to be holy and prophetic acts.

Like the Gospel of Jesus, the Quaker message was a demonstration of the great reversal of the world's order, the mighty shall be brought low, the lowly shall be raised up. These themes are taken up and developed further by the Apostle Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 1–4 where he describes in great detail the contrast between the wisdom of the world and the rulers of this age with the 'foolishness' of God.

Nayler and Pauline mysticism

A key source for the radical, apocalyptic-style gospel Nayler preached can be found in the mysticism of the Pauline 'mystery' of divine wisdom. In Paul's writing the Divine mystery, completely opposed to the wisdom of this world, is envisaged as that which will radically transform and finally perfect the world. This wisdom does not reveal itself in mere words or ideas, or persuasive rhetoric or eloquent speech, but in an event, the passion and cross of Christ—a concrete demonstration, what Paul calls a demonstration of the Spirit and power (1 Cor. 1.17-25). The Pauline text that illuminates this theme and seems to resonate deeply with Nayler's own humble persona is 1 Cor. 2.1-5:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God [mystery is from Greek *mystikos* from which we get the word mystic] to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. [Quakers were known as 'tremblers', hence the name]. My speech and my proclamation was not with

plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Subsequent texts in Corinthians refer to the wisdom which Paul does speak to the 'mature' which I would suggest corresponds to the 'convinced'. This wisdom, writes Paul, is secret and hidden, and is only revealed through the spirit, it is not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the spirit, 'interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual' (1 Cor. 2.7-13). This spiritual discernment cannot be understood by those who are unspiritual, says Paul. Paul concludes his section of contrasting divine spiritual wisdom with the world's wisdom, with the audacious statement 'We have the mind of Christ', echoed by the early Quakers. So when Nayler makes what sounds like bold statements such as, 'This is that doctrine which is sealed from all the world, nor can any one know it or receive it truly who are in the reprobate state, though many be disputing about it in the dark, which none know but the children of light', he is simply paraphrasing Paul in 1 Corinthians 2. To further link it to the Pauline mystery, Nayler goes on to say:

So as one who had obtained favour to have this mystery revealed, I shall according to permission write a few words, as it is received in Jesus, yet can be received by no man's wisdom, nor any who only are born after the flesh; but who knows what it is to walk in the Spirit, shall witness me herein.

If we had time to read all of 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 and compare it with many of the quotes from Nayler that Damrosch has highlighted, the remarkable similarity would be quite evident. This Pauline teaching helps us understand the distinction Damrosch demonstrates in his book, of Quaker preaching to the unconverted and his descriptions of Quaker worship among the convinced, as well as why Fox says would say his goal is to 'bring people to the end of all preaching, [after] your once speaking to people, than people come into the thing ye speak of'. This also sheds light on the intriguing descriptions of Quaker worship (among the convinced) that Damrosch has included in his book.

For example, he acknowledges the shift from the highly kataphatic style of prophetic preaching to an approach very close to the apophatic. From prophetic preaching to the 'not yet spiritual', to an apophatic-style of group mysticism which takes the 'spiritual' to a sacred space of silence beyond words. This sounds quite similar to classical apophatic mysticism, a contemplative state of self-emptying which mystics claim as the highest form of prayer, a gift given through the spirit, but which is reached by

preparation through spiritual disciplines (asceticism) practiced by those who have attained 'perfection' or at the very least a deep spiritual maturity, a union with God.

This silence of Quaker worship is broken occasionally by speech that is described as incoherent and trancelike. 'Hanging together like ropes of sand' is the imaginative metaphor of one writer quoted by Damrosch in trying to capture its ephemeral quality. I wonder if this could be a kind of glossolalia, a prayer language, or spirit language as understood in charismatic circles.

Damrosch's description of Quaker incantatory preaching also seems highly suggestive of Pentecostal-style preaching in African-American worship. The 'incantatory repetition', the 'interweaving scriptural terms and metaphors in order to overwhelm rational resistance by endless various on a few key words' the rhythmic energy, and patterns that 'give the listener a sense of immediate co-participation in the utterance so that the minister's words echo within himself' (p. 81). Damrosch's description of Quaker preaching reminded me immediately of Black Pentecostal preaching that I have experienced. Damrosch does not make this connection between early Quakerism and Pentecostal preaching though it seems suggestive. But the uniquely Quaker aspect of this style of worship, not found in charismatic worship, is the turn to the apophatic in the use of silence. But it may be that charismatic worship has the potential to take the worshipper to that next level of communal prayer discovered by early Quakers (and early Anabaptists groups as well) but has yet to be explored or reached in contemporary charismatic worship settings.

Although I've digressed a little into the Quaker worship experience, I'd like to return to the linking with Pauline mysticism, in order to further illustrate what I find to be Damrosch's most intriguing discoveries and one of his most incisive points: his recognition that Quakers were completely immersed in the Bible—the language, stories, images and figures of the biblical world. Damrosch claims much of Quaker historical interpretation is sorely deficient because few scholars have been aware of the extent of Quaker writing which emerges directly from biblical texts, either direct quotes or allusions. The parallels with 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 are just one example.

Damrosch has helped resolve the enigma of the Quakers relation to the Bible, by enabling us to see that Scripture was internalized within them. As Damrosch puts it so concisely, 'they participated in, rather than merely borrowed, the language of the Bible'. Since relatively few historians are also

biblical scholars, I am in total agreement with Damrosch's accurate critique that for most historians half the dialogue is missed! And again, Nayler's dialogue with 1 Corinthians 2 is an obvious example. Thus I endorse his basic critique of much of Quaker historical scholarship. To underestimate or in any way diminish the biblical world view, or see it as incidental to the real meaning of Quaker principles and beliefs, and merely a cultural construct on which to hang enlightenment principles, or timeless truths, is a kind of demythologizing of Quaker history that severely skews our understanding. Quakers were recovering primitive, radical, charismatic Pauline Christianity. They claimed that project of rediscovering the New Testament church, over and over. Neither Nayler nor any other Quaker leader can be accurately portrayed without recognizing the depth of their biblical identification. Every motivation and belief held by early Quakers was directly connected to their biblical immersion.

A major part of the Quaker dilemma in the context of their seventeenth-century radical style spirituality revolved around how to symbolize and express outwardly, or make 'real' (make physical) that which was internal and mystical. The extent of their mystical devotion to Christ, and the fervor, passion and inward ecstasy of their religious experience could not be expressed by the usual acts of devotion and worship—the ritual of sacrament, baptism, communion, liturgy, vestments, use of images, feasts, and so on—the kinds of expressions that flow from deeply-held religious belief and experience. Almost all of the traditional trappings of Christian devotion had been eliminated to the barest minimum because the old symbols and rituals had been corrupted and divested of meaning for them. Thus they had to create new forms of expressing their Christian devotion in a public, physical way. Because they were a 'charismatic' movement—spirit-filled and spirit-led, directly by the 'Power of the Lord' as they continually claimed, these signs and symbols were invariable bodily-related rather than material objects. The Power of the Lord was not an abstract concept to them, but bodily sensation experienced internally and exhibited externally. They themselves became the ritual signs—quaking, and trembling, groans and tears, spontaneous prophetic preaching, singing in the spirit, working of miracles of healings and exorcisms, going naked as a sign, wearing of sackcloth and ashes, fasting and so on. They themselves in their physical bodies became the sacramental symbols of their faith. Possessed by the spirit (enthusiasts they were) they enacted in their physical beings the symbols of their charismatic spirituality—with its strong body-mind connectedness. (Another area ripe for exploration, for another time, is the

challenge to their dualism—they may not have been dualists at all.) That Nayler and other Quakers as well, would dramatize their faith through reenactments of biblical scenes became a form of prophecy, a form of preaching, and a means to declare the everlasting Gospel. And since the perfect imitation of Christ was their spiritual goal, Nayler's compulsion to reenact the passion narrative is not so surprising, when other forms and rituals were not meaningful to him.

Individualism vs Communitarianism

I seriously question Damrosch's assertion that the Quaker movement ever held an 'ideology of absolute individualism'. From the time Fox and Nayler first began to attract followers they saw themselves as a 'church', the pure, voluntary church, united in their devotion to Christ and the welfare of their fellow religionists.

Damrosch seems to contradict his own assertion of 'absolute individualism' when he writes, 'from the beginning a strong sense of mutual support counterbalanced the isolation of the prophet'. He even quotes Mack's comment that 'society made the individual; salvation made bonding'. Quakers from the beginning were a deeply-bonded community. I would contend that the community bonding was the glue that held Nayler within the Quaker enclave even when they denounced his behavior. Had he been a radical individualist the natural reaction would have been to cut himself off from the community that rejected him.

Rather I would propose they defined themselves more like a monastic order—but an apostolic order, wanderers, not cloistered, an order that lived and engaged in the world. But still an *order*—bound by the rule of Christ, obedience to Christ, to which all adhered. Fox eventually wrote of 'Gospel order', but prior to that both Nayler and Fox referred to the *rule of Christ* as the basis for community discipline. Quakers always distinguished themselves from the ranters who *were* radical individualists, as well as antinomians, by their strong communal worship. Fox's oft repeated phrase 'the power of the Lord is over all' meant the community unified in their spiritual bond with the Divine. Because they renounced all worldly connections does not necessarily indicate radical individualism as Damrosch contends, but the mystical quality of detachment, holy indifference to the material world, in the manner of a Franciscan friar, Dominican preacher or Jesuit missionary, living the itinerant, wandering life, yet always attached to a community. Another similarity with medieval monasticism was their

contemptus mundi—their rejection of the world. Damrosch unequivocally labels their relation to the world as against culture rather than a stance above culture, or transforming culture. He bases this on their strong belief in perfectionism. ‘The price of perfection was unconditional rejection—not transformation or amelioration—of the world they lived in. Their psychological existence was not just unworldly, but antiworldly’. Damrosch is unequivocal on this point, but I wonder if the Quaker relation to the world is much more complex. Fox often spoke of being ‘over the world’ but over or above is somewhat different than total rejection. It is a sense of superiority—spiritual superiority over the material. I would suggest rather that they saw themselves as an alternative community and as ‘resident aliens’. (Therefore I would not go so far as Damrosch to say they totally rejected the world—they did not flee to the desert, but rather like the preaching orders, brought the desert to the city.)

Conclusion

I resonate with Damrosch’s insightful and psychological analysis of the Quaker–Puritan conflict. Quakers were the scapegoat for the ascendant Puritans. Puritans projected onto Quakers aspects of their own beliefs they could not quite accept. In the same way the Protestant reformers projected their unacceptable beliefs (the logical outcomes of their own principles) onto the Anabaptists and then denounced them and killed them. Every group, it seems, needs a scapegoat on whom to project their unacceptable aspects. Puritans scapegoated the Quakers, Quakers scapegoated Nayler. And in a deep sense Nayler desired to be the scapegoat, as Christ himself was the scapegoat.

To conclude, my main point of contention with Damrosch is his labeling Quakers as antinomians. To believe that Christ’s presence within could overcome sin, and transform an individual and bring him or her into perfection, is not antinomian, but a deeply mystical Christian perfectionism. I commend Damrosch for his perceptive analysis of the charismatic, mystical, and intensely biblical spirituality of early Quakers. In Damrosch’s capable hands Nayler emerges as the embodiment of holiness, who despite, or perhaps because of, his bizarre, mind-boggling, but imaginative dramatic actions, inspires and dazzles us with the extraordinary passion of a Quaker St Francis.

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