

Rufus Jones and Mysticism

DANIEL E. BASSUK

Rufus Jones' interpretation of Quakerism, which did so much to revive and reshape a moribund Society of Friends earlier in this century, was mistaken in its central thesis; the very life of contemporary Quakerism is therefore founded on an egregious misunderstanding!¹

INTRODUCTION

Rufus Jones has been dead now for more than a quarter of a century. In approaching the task of criticizing the works of this imposing figure, we ask: has there yet been a fair and adequate critique of the mysticism of Rufus Jones? Our answer must be "no." Rufus Jones was without question the most formidable Quaker figure during his own lifetime (1863-1948) as well as one of the half dozen most influential figures in the history of the Society of Friends. It would have been a difficult task while he was still alive to criticize a man who held thirteen honorary doctors' degrees. The seeds of discontent with Jones's interpretation of Quaker mysticism were nevertheless sown during his lifetime, but they have not been adequately developed in the thirty years since his death.

In the last ten years of Rufus Jones's life we see the beginnings of research which was uncovering evidence very different from what Jones had been saying. In 1940 Rachel Hadley King wrote a doctoral dissertation at Yale University titled "George Fox and the Light Within, 1650-1660," which interpreted Fox's concept of the Inner Light in a manner totally at variance with the way in which Jones understood it. In 1943 the Quaker scholar Lewis Benson published a pamphlet titled *Prophetic Quakerism*, which, while never referring to Rufus Jones by name, criticized modern Quakerism for its misunderstanding of Fox and early Quakerism. Later writings

of Benson specifically pointed to Rufus Jones as the modern interpreter of the mystical mode of the Quaker tradition.²

In 1946, Geoffrey F. Nuttall published his scholarly study, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*.³ In presenting early Quakerism in its immediate historical context, Nuttall brought out the lack of any influence by Jacob Boehme and the Cambridge Platonists upon George Fox, despite the assertion by Rufus Jones that they had had a major influence. Nuttall demonstrated that early Quakerism was an outgrowth of radical Puritanism rather than of the mystical movements of the continent. He noted that the Spiritual Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries preceded Puritanism and in some cases anticipated the radical Puritanism of the Quakers, but that their influence, if any, was indirect.

In spite of these studies of Fox which were at variance with Rufus Jones's interpretation of Fox, no adequate critique has yet been attempted of Jones and his affirmation mysticism. The following is an attempt in this direction.

I. JONES ON THE "MYSTICAL" AND "MYSTICISM"

In the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (henceforth abbreviated *ERE*), Rufus Jones wrote the introductory article on "Mysticism" in 1917.⁴ In it he makes the following important distinction:

The word 'mysticism' has, furthermore, been commonly used to cover both (1) the first-hand experience of direct intercourse with God and (2) the theologico-metaphysical doctrine of the soul's possible union with Absolute Reality, i.e. with God. It would be conducive to clarity to restrict the word 'mysticism' to the latter significance, namely, as an equivalent for the German word *Mystik*, and as designating the historic doctrine of the relationship and potential union of the human soul with Ultimate Reality, and to use the term 'mystical experience' for direct intercourse with God.

First hand, or mystical, experience is primarily a psychological question; the doctrine of mysticism is essentially a metaphysical problem.⁵

In this article Rufus Jones clearly makes the distinction between mysticism and the mystical. However, in 1936 Jones was to modify his earlier understanding of *Mystik*, writing that "the German language has two words where we have but one. It uses '*Mysticismus*' for the occult and the abnormal, and '*Mystik*' for the theory of life that God and man are akin and in reciprocal relationship."⁶ Elsewhere he understands the nature of mysticism to be grounded in "Greek rationalistic metaphysics" and tells us that "the Platonic stream of life and thought is beyond question the greatest single source of European mysticism."⁷ He also realizes that "this intellectual formulation — and it is the metaphysics underlying historical mysticism — necessarily involves a *via negativa*."⁸

Of Jones's fifty-four books, only two have the word "mysticism" in the title: *The Flowering of Mysticism: The Friends of God in the Fourteenth Century* (1939), and *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth* (1932). Since he does not use the word mysticism in the precise way in which he defined it in the *ERE* anywhere else in his writings, let us look at these two books to see how Jones means it to be understood.

In *Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth* Jones starts out by saying:

I have always used the word mysticism with a much wider meaning, and shall continue to do so. The essential feature of a mystical experience as I view it is not the negative path of approach nor the special scale of ladder-steps upward, nor the empty-handed, or *nirvana*, state in which the experience culminates. Its essential aspect is rather the *conviction of certainty* that the person's own soul has found its goal of reality in God.⁹

Jones makes it clear in this book that he is concerned with the affirmation mystics rather than the negative ones, and sees no reason for denying an extension of meaning to the word mysticism. This indicates an unwillingness on Jones's part to abide by his earlier definition in the *ERE*.

In the book *The Flowering of Mysticism* Jones gives one of his many famous definitions of what mysticism means for

him: "Mysticism is an immediate, intuitive, experimental knowledge of God, or one may say it is consciousness of a Beyond, or of transcendent Reality, or of Divine Presence."¹⁰ What Jones is saying in all of his definitions of mysticism, including this one, is that mysticism is for him a psychological matter made up of experiential and non-rational experiences. Nowhere but in the *ERE* does he hold to the distinction made there that mysticism is a metaphysical doctrine and is distinct from the mystical, which is psychological.

It is quite evident that, although Rufus Jones made the distinction between mysticism and mystical experience in the *ERE*, he decided not to follow it. This is indicated by those two books in which "mysticism" appears in the title and by the feelings expressed in his remark that "I am not interested in mysticism as an *ism*. It turns out in most accounts to be a dry and abstract thing... It is mystical experience and not mysticism that is worthy of our study."¹¹

The individual mystics and groups of mystics for whom Jones shows most appreciation in his historical studies — George Fox, St. Paul, the Spiritual Reformers, the Seekers, the Friends of God, and "some exponents of mystical religion" — are all interpreted to be mystical rather than involved with the metaphysical doctrine of mysticism. When he is confronted with mysticism understood in its metaphysical sense, he disagrees and is ready to dispute it. For example, when Jones read Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence* (1941) he disagreed with Huxley's understanding of mysticism: "Aldous Huxley in that remarkable book, *Grey Eminence*, raises the question, 'Why shouldn't Mysticism die out?' as he thinks (I believe wrongly) that it seemed likely to do at the end of the seventeenth century."¹² The reason for the disagreement about mysticism is that Jones is thinking of it in a psychological sense, while Huxley was thinking of it in a metaphysical sense. And in 1945, when Huxley published *The Perennial Philosophy*, an anthology of mysticism which emphasized negating the self, Jones explicitly took issue with Huxley. In *The Luminous Trail* (1947) Jones objects that the perennial philosophy was presented solely as a *via negativa*. He concedes "that there is an element of truth in this insistence on the

severe reduction of self-importance," since "egoism is an undoubted hindrance." But for Jones, the effort at complete self-naughting means "that you cease to be a person at all," and this he takes to be against the divine purpose.¹³

Jones took issue not only with Huxley but with the German scholar Friedrich Heiler. In 1936 Rufus Jones disagreed with Heiler's concept of mysticism, saying,

Friedrich Heiler, . . . in his definition of mysticism, has pushed the negative aspect of it to its farthest limits. He defines mysticism as "that form of communion with God in which the world and the self are radically negated, in which the human personality is dissolved, submerged and engulfed in the infinite one-ness of Divinity."

Here, I am convinced, a metaphysical theory is voicing itself, not an experience. Mysticism has taken this form because it is dominated by a metaphysical theory. My contention always has been, and still is, that *this particular way* of approach was determined by a prevailing type of philosophical outlook, and is in no real sense essential to genuine mystical experience.¹⁴

It can be observed that Rufus Jones dispenses with Heiler, as with Huxley, in terms of his own preference for mystical experience rather than for the metaphysical doctrine of mysticism.

It is ironic that both Heiler and Jones cite Archbishop Nathan Söderblom as their source for the idea of dividing up mysticism into two distinguishable types. From Söderblom's division of mysticism into the mysticism of infinity and the mysticism of personality, Heiler derives his distinction between mysticism and the prophetic, while Jones comes away with the concepts of negation mysticism and affirmation mysticism.¹⁵ Söderblom's mysticism of personality is the source of both Heiler's "prophetic consciousness" and Jones's "affirmation mysticism," and the two are similar in being biblical, ethical, personalistic, action and service oriented, and concerned with historical time.

What has become of "mysticism" as understood in the sense of the German *Mystik*, the metaphysical doctrine of the relationship and potential union of the human soul with

Ultimate Reality? For Rufus Jones, mysticism in this sense is to be rejected. He finds it completely out of touch with reality and with his age, and does all that he can to uproot and destroy it. Jones exhibits a preference for an experiential mystical event which is concrete and vital and leads to positive action. A philosophical approach such as that of Heiler, which leads to a Platonic ideal or a Plotinian oneness, is too abstract and non-pragmatic for Jones. Jones conceives of the Inner Light as something which can be experienced in the hush and silence of the Quaker meeting for worship. It leads one to an active concern for one's fellow beings. Jones actually knew the reality of this experience in his own life.

II. JONES AND THE QUAKERS

A. JONES AND GEORGE FOX

In this section I will investigate how Rufus Jones arrived at the belief that Quakerism was mystical. In his "Introduction" to the historical study, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, Jones states that "Quakerism, as a type of Christianity, is deeply *mystical* and also deeply *prophetical*."¹⁶ He says this in connection with his discussion of the founder of Quakerism, George Fox. There is no doubt that his concept of a mystical Quakerism stems from his view of Fox.

Rufus Jones wrote three books on George Fox and published an abridged version of Fox's *Journal* in 1903, titled *George Fox, An Autobiography*. He wrote many chapters in his books and in articles for journals, and delivered numerous addresses, on Fox. Jones believes that Fox took his place in religious history among the spiritual reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, among men like Denck, Franck, Schwenckfeld, Castellio, and Boehme, and that these reformers "were in sympathy with the mystic's type of religion."¹⁷ By "sympathy" Jones means that they held to the mystical doctrine that the divine Seed or Inward Light was the essential nexus between God and man. From 1903 until just shortly before his death in 1948, a period of forty-five years, Rufus Jones was espousing the belief that Fox had said that "there is something of God, which may be called a divine seed or a

divine light, laid down in the nature and disposition of the soul."¹⁸ From this belief Jones concludes that "Fox belongs obviously enough in the circle of mystics and those who responded to his proclamation were usually of this same mystical type."¹⁹

To surround Fox with the aura of the mystical, Rufus Jones chose for the frontispiece of his book *George Fox, An Autobiography* a painting by Gerard Honthorst called "George Fox in an Ecstasy." This is now considered a spurious painting: "The only year Honthorst was in England was 1628, when Fox was 4 years old, and today few I suppose would think it in character with Fox at all," says John Nickalls.²⁰ In 1903 Jones viewed Fox as an ecstatic mystic in the direct lineage of Plotinus, John of the Cross, and St. Teresa, but gradually over the years he modified his view and began to view Fox as "a new type of mystic."²¹ By 1930 Jones perceived Fox's mysticism to be not of the ecstatic type but of the active, humanist, affirmative type. In Jones's book *George Fox, Seeker and Friend* (1930), he says of Fox that "his highest moments are not ecstatic and ineffable. . . . He was always an affirmation mystic."²² He adds that Fox "must not be judged or estimated in the class of scholarly or critical reformers. He does not belong there. He belongs in the order of the mystical, or intuitionist, prophets. He is of the same general type as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catharine of Siena, and Jacob Boehme of Silesia."²³ According to Rufus Jones the essential message of George Fox was a rediscovery of the truth of the divine immanence in man. Over the years Jones's view of Fox changed from seeing him first as an ecstatic mystic, then as a spiritual reformer, to seeing him finally as a prophet.

B. JONES AND QUAKER DOCTRINES

I began at once [1894] to interpret to my large list of readers a thoroughly definite type of Quakerism, expressed through two editorials each week. I soon discovered that this was a heroic mission. There were a great many Friends who were thoroughly opposed to any change of outlook. Nearly every issue of the paper reveals lines

of opposition and my correspondence, carefully preserved, reveals the issues involved. But for almost twenty years I went straight on interpreting the type of Quakerism which I was convinced ought to prevail in America, and in retrospect it seems to me to have been heroic business.²⁴

(1) THE INNER LIGHT

In 1943 the Quaker scholar, Lewis Benson, pointed out that there were essentially two traditions, existing in Quakerism side by side, which he calls the prophetic and the philosophical.²⁵ These two traditions are analogous to our categories of the mystical and mysticism, since the prophetic is mystical while mysticism is philosophical. Benson points out that early Quakerism of the seventeenth century was essentially prophetic and that modern Quakerism has transformed the early vision into a philosophical mysticism. Benson points out that for the early Quakers the Inner Light was understood prophetically to be none other than Christ: "It is clear that the early Friends understood the Light and Christ to be one and that the light that they preached and witnessed to was mediated to them through Jesus Christ and not otherwise."²⁶

This fact was corroborated in the Yale University dissertation of Rachel Hadley King, *George Fox and the Light Within, 1650-1660*, in which Miss King indicated that Fox meant two things by the Light Within. First, the Light is that which shows a man evil and turns him toward the saving Light, which is Christ; and second, the Light is that which brings one into unity with God and with man. According to Rachel King, in the latter case the Light serves man as the *end* toward which he is moving, and in the first case the Light serves man as the *means* to that end. She pointed out that only twenty times does Fox relate the Light to God, whereas the Light is related to Christ one hundred twelve times. Of these, thirty times Christ is the Light, and in the remainder the Light is *from* Christ.²⁷ The Light, therefore, is both man's authority and his guide. It is universal and free to all men, though it is not a part of human nature. It is not the essence of God or Christ within man but the *activity* of Christ within him.

It is ironic that in 1940 Rufus Jones wrote the introduction to Rachel King's published version of her doctoral dissertation. He was evidently pleased that she had found Fox a mystic of the Protestant type rather than of the Catholic type,²⁸ and therefore overlooked her finding that Fox's doctrine of the Inner Light was in the prophetic tradition while all along his interpretation had been in another tradition, the philosophical.

The findings of Geoffrey F. Nuttall, in his scholarly study of *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, correspond to the argument of Rachel King that Fox explicitly denied that the Light Within was natural to man. Fox's idea of the Light was supernatural. It was divine and spiritually derived from Christ and was not the light of nature, of conscience, or of reason.²⁹

"Soon after Fox's death there was a total cessation of the preaching that 'Christ has come to teach his people himself.'"³⁰ Fox's whole prophetic Christology went into eclipse. From the eighteenth century onward we hear nothing more about Christ the prophet. The Quakers began to think of their whole faith and practice as having one center and one starting point — the doctrine of the Inner Light. This Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light seemed to be evolving into a theory of religion which was increasingly remote from the Christian revelation and the witness of the voice of God. William Penn in the seventeenth century spoke of the Light Within as Christ, while John Woolman in the eighteenth century "never uses the term 'Inward Light' but always 'that which is pure' or 'pure wisdom'" as found in the Epistle of James.³¹

It is crucial to recognize that Rufus Jones seldom referred to the Inner Light as the Christ Within.³² Jones's Christology views Christ more as a recurrent Christ than as the historical Christ. Since 1903 Jones helped interpret for modern times the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light in Benson's philosophical sense, making it a link in the chain of philosophical mysticism which includes Plotinus, Eckhart, and the Cambridge Platonists. Benson clearly brings out the distinction between the prophetic and the philosophical traditions in the words of

the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist, John Norris, who took the philosophical position, saying,

I. The Quakers usually talk of the light, as of some divine communication or manifestation only, whereas I make it to be the very essence and substance of the deity, which I suppose virtually to contain all things in it, and to be intimately united to our minds.

II. The Quakers represent this light as a sort of extraordinary inspiration (whence they have the name of enthusiasts) whereas I suppose it to be man's natural and ordinary way of understanding.³³

This analysis of Rufus Jones shows that he is in agreement with the philosophical position of John Norris and the Cambridge Platonists. Norris and Jones's interpretation of the Inner Light is Greek-philosophical and not biblical-prophetic. Jones does not need the mediation of Christ as the Inner Light but speaks of a direct and immediate kinship of the human with the divine through the Inner Light. Even though he roots himself in the affirmation mysticism of St. Paul and St. John and George Fox, for whom the Inner Light is Christ, Jones parts company with them theologically.

In supporting an "Inner Light Quakerism," Rufus Jones has created what Lewis Benson calls a "mystical Quakerism"³⁴ for our age. Its major premise is that the early Quaker teaching about the Light can and should be understood as John Norris and the Cambridge Platonists understood it. But Benson cautions us that

the early Friends simply never understood their great inward experience in anything but strictly Christian and prophetic terms. It is possible to call their intense consciousness of the indwelling Christ "mysticism" but in using this word we are certainly not bringing them under a category that will make them links in the chain of philosophical mysticism.³⁵

And yet for Jones the Inner Light came to signify the spiritual potentiality in human life and the essence of God within man. This view of the Light Within goes back to the Platonic move-

ment in philosophy and may be traced through the evolving religious world-view of the Greeks to the impact of this world-view on Christian thought in all ages, including our own. For Jones this is exactly the link which connected Quakerism with the medieval tradition of mysticism. This nexus which Rufus Jones established has been very influential in creating the "mystical Quakerism" commonly found among Quakers today.

(2) THAT OF GOD IN EVERY MAN

The phrase "that of God in every man" has been widely used in the twentieth century as an expression which signifies the central truth of the Quaker message. Rufus Jones says that the Quakers "form the first organized body of Christians who built their entire faith upon the principle that something of God is present in every man."³⁶ George Fox used this phrase or variants of it hundreds of times. When Rufus Jones used it in 1903 he was reviving the use of this phrase after it had lain dormant in the Quaker vocabulary for nearly two hundred years. How did the long-forgotten phrase get into the spotlight and stay there?

Lewis Benson's research reveals that, when Rufus Jones abridged Fox's *Journal* in 1903 and wrote *Social Law in the Spiritual World* (1904), Jones interpreted the Inner Light to mean that there is something of God in the human soul.³⁷ But is this what Fox meant by these concepts?

The meaning of "that of God in every man" in early Quakerism was man's capacity to respond to God and his will, in contrast to the modern Quaker view that man is a self-subsistent portion of divinity or that he is so fused with the great source of divinity that his nature is inherently good and therefore he is not prone to evil. However, there has been a growing tendency in twentieth-century Quakerism to derive man's dignity and worth from his own innate goodness. This has been accompanied by inroads of humanistic thought into contemporary Quakerism. Insofar as it is admitted today that man derives his goodness from God, one tendency in Quaker thought is the assumption that "that of God in every man" is a spark from the divine — a self-subsistent spark which has come from the main source of goodness. Another tendency

has been to think of "that of God in every man" as continuous with God rather than a separate entity created by God. Thus it becomes either a doctrine of emanation, similar to Plotinus's cosmology, or a panentheism in which man is regarded as part of God and therefore immersed in the reservoir of all goodness.

Benson points out in *QRT* that in the last few weeks of Jones's life his investigation of Fox's meaning of "that of God in every man" revealed that Fox thought of this concept as Barclay had, and not in the Plotinian sense that Jones had been suggesting for forty-five years.³⁸

Jones views man as much more autonomous, self-sufficient, and self-propelled by an inward God-principle resident in man from birth than Fox ever did. Jones's interpretation of Quaker doctrines has helped to substantiate the belief of many Quakers today that man is his own divinity and can dispense with the archaic notion that there is a God who exists apart from man. Rufus Jones re-interpreted "that of God in every man" and the Inner Light in a way that neither Fox nor the early Quakers ever meant them to be understood.

III. JONES AND THE MYSTICS

Having suggested that Rufus Jones grafted his type of mystical Quakerism onto the tree of philosophical mysticism, I shall now turn to some mystics to observe the way in which this grafting was accomplished. I have already shown how Rufus Jones interpreted Fox as a mystic and Quaker doctrines in a mystical way. Now I shall look at what Jones found compatible among the mystics and observe the uses and misuses he made of them. I shall focus my attention upon the way in which Rufus Jones perceived the following:

- a) Clement of Alexandria
- b) Plotinus
- c) Meister Eckhart
- d) The mystical poets of England and America

A. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (150?-215 A.D.)

In *The Trail of Life in the Middle Years* Rufus Jones defines mysticism in this way: "The essential characteristic of it is the attainment of personal conviction by an individual that

the human spirit and the divine Spirit have met, have found each other, and are in mutual and reciprocal correspondence as spirit with Spirit."³⁹ The phrase "mutual and reciprocal correspondence" is a favorite phrase of Jones. He borrowed it from Clement of Alexandria. For Jones the phrase means that there exists a connecting link between man and the divine in which mutuality and reciprocity dwell. Jones holds to a mutual and reciprocal correspondence between man and God because he believes (a) that the Spirit of God and the human spirit are qualitatively the same, and through mutual and reciprocal correspondence the soul can find God, (b) that George Fox referred to a stepladder between God and man, and (c) that there is a "Jacob's ladder" within man by which he can ascend to God and find that mutual, reciprocal communion with the Beyond Within.

However, the phrase "mutual and reciprocal correspondence" is used by Jones in a way that was quite foreign to Clement. For Clement, faith "is the product of 'the exercise of obedience,' and it becomes 'a kind of divine mutual and reciprocal correspondence.'"⁴⁰ Another aspect of this mutual and reciprocal correspondence for Clement was prayer. Prayer was another aspect of faith, and both involved this mutual correspondence. Jones does not use this phrase in the way in which Clement did at all.

Rufus Jones revered Clement from his youth. In 1910 he published a little book entitled *Selections from the Writings of Clement of Alexandria*. When we look at this book we find that Jones is using those selections from Clement which most correspond to his Quakerism and his affirmation mysticism. For example, Jones translates Clement's word "Gnostic" as "the complete Christian."⁴¹ Jones also finds that fundamental to the thought of Clement was "the doctrine of an immanent God, moving through all life and in immediate relation with souls of men."⁴²

While Jones is stressing the immanent theology of Clement, John Chapman in the *ERE* points out that Clement was truly a mystic of the negative way. His God was to be sought in the darkness (a saying which paved the way for Dionysius the Areopagite and John of the Cross) through the familiar

via negativa, including mortification and contempt of the world and implying a life of self-conquest and of contemplation of God through faith.⁴³ On the other hand, Jones is giving us an interpretation of Clement stripped of his negative approach, in order to stress immanence and to preserve the mutuality between God and man.

B. PLOTINUS (205-270 A.D.)

One of the things which Jones admires so greatly in Plotinus, and a reason why he is so fond of quoting him, is his first-hand experience of God and his emphatic doctrine that the universe in its ultimate nature is spiritual. Jones also feels a strong kinship to the Plotinian doctrine of the continuity between the human soul and the divine Soul, which results in the longing of the soul to return to its homeland in the One.

However, Rufus Jones has an ambivalent attitude toward Plotinus. On the one hand he considers Plotinus to be "one of the world's greatest mystics,"⁴⁴ to whom he is "always deeply indebted,"⁴⁵ and Jones praises him in these words: "Plotinus... is one of the major figures in the history of the development of human thought. He was one of the greatest of the perennial philosophers of antiquity, and he was one of the profoundest and most influential mystics of all time."⁴⁶

The thing which troubles Rufus Jones is that for Plotinus the highest experience of God was found in ecstasy. Jones is saddened by the fact that a mystic who had such a profound first-hand experience of God should have taken the *via negativa* which led to ecstasy. In *The Radiant Life* he contrasts the negative mysticism of Plotinus with the affirmation mysticism of Saints John and Paul, Boehme, and Fox. On the Plotinian influence on negative mysticism he says:

The God of this formulation is above and beyond all that is concrete and finite. He is not "this"; He is not "this"; He is not "this." The person who would reach the goal of bliss in union with the Absolute God must therefore rise above all states and processes of mind, above emotions and thoughts, above aspirations and deeds, and find in wordless communion, in a super-consciousness,

transcending images or ideas or mental states of any kind, a junction of the unlost Soul-Center with Absolute Reality — “a flight of the alone to the Alone.” That formulation quite obviously makes Mysticism take the way of *ecstasy*.⁴⁷

Jones declares that Plotinus and the mystics of India returned with empty hands, having seen God but being unable to “tell about it in any words of common speech.”⁴⁸ Details of the last stage of the mystic path can be divulged only to those who are initiated.⁴⁹ The only words he can use are “Neti-Neti,” he is not this, he is not that. Jones feels that the ecstasy which the Neoplatonic school introduced into Christianity was a very costly, unfortunate, and dangerous contribution which he connects with abnormal states of mind.

What Jones admires in Plotinus is his first-hand direct experience of God, *i.e.*, the mystical dimension of Plotinus. What he dislikes is the ecstatic culmination arrived at from following the mysticism of the *via negativa*.

C. MEISTER ECKHART (1260 - 1327)

Rufus Jones likes the mild and normal type of affirmation mysticism and fears the negative mysticism associated with ecstasies and raptures. Jones tells us that Eckhart “did not strain after ecstasies. He was not interested in psychopathic wonders. He was not fond of emotional surges.”⁵⁰ In addition, Jones finds in Eckhart a prime example of the personality-building effect of mystical experience and in particular “the creative expansion of the entire personality. Eckhart glowed with the urge of a tremendous new life-impulse. He became quiveringly alive with powerful vitality. There was a gushing in, a welling up, of new and constructive life-forces — an *élan vital* plainly operating in him.”⁵¹

Another reason why Eckhart appealed to Rufus Jones is that he views him as a tremendously vital man who put aid to his neighbor above ecstatic rapture. Jones pictures him as “a highly practical man, who did his day’s work with fidelity and with telling effect. He eminently preserved his *balance*, and he kept his spiritual perspective healthy.”⁵² Further on, Jones says that Eckhart kept “from being over-ascetic”⁵³ and that

“he has a human interest in the people about him; he feels their sorrows and needs, and is *active* in his sympathies.”⁵⁴ In addition, Eckhart “put Martha above Mary, *i.e.* activity above contemplation. . . . ‘Mary is still at school: Martha hath learnt her lesson. It is better to feed the hungry than to see even such visions as St. Paul saw.’”⁵⁵

Rufus Jones thus emphasizes Eckhart’s humanitarian appeal. Jones holds the belief that “God’s purpose in contemplation is fruitfulness in works.”⁵⁶ What appealed to Jones was the spirit of Eckhart revealed in such a passage as: “If a man were in rapture such as Paul experienced, and if he knew of a person who needed something of him, I think it would be far better out of love to leave the rapture and serve the needy man.”⁵⁷ For Jones, Eckhart had a human interest in the people about him. “He lays down a noble principle: . . . ‘What a man takes in by contemplation he must pour out in love.’”⁵⁸

For both Jones and Eckhart the ground of God and the ground of the soul are identical. Jones feels that if Eckhart had been a spiritual reformer in a later age instead of a Dominican priest in the fourteenth century, he probably would have stood unflinchingly for his pantheistical utterances.⁵⁹ However, Eckhart’s concept of the Spark was derived from the Plotinian and Gnostic ideas of reabsorption or merging into the source of the Spark, the Eternal Fire. For Fox, the Light was not a part of human nature; it was not even the essence of God or Christ within man, but the activity of Christ within man. And the Seed was the divine potentiality within man which becomes activated by the Light which is Christ. But Rufus Jones in looking at Eckhart and Fox slurs over the differences and emphasizes only the similarities surrounding the imagery of light.

In *The Flowering of Mysticism* Jones quotes Nicholas Berdyaev as follows, “German mysticism is one of the most important manifestations of the human spirit.”⁶⁰ But it is significant that Jones does not quote the entire sentence of Berdyaev, which is, “German mysticism, one of the most important manifestations of the human spirit, has been Gnostic in character.”⁶¹ Jones chooses to stress the mystical aspects of

Eckhart, while Berdyaev in relating these to Gnosticism retains a sense of the metaphysical nature of mysticism.

The partial quoting of Berdyaev points out that there was a negative aspect to Eckhart's mysticism which was incompatible with Jones's thought. Because Rufus Jones advocates an affirmation mysticism he cannot endorse Eckhart's negative mysticism. Jones does not believe that if God is to enter, creatureliness must depart, as did Eckhart. As he read Eckhart's sermons Jones felt that they were stocked with "bad philosophy and worse allegory."⁶² And when it comes to Eckhart's *via negativa* Jones loses sight of him as he got closer and closer to the "unknowing knowing" of God. Concerning the doctrine that the height of knowledge is known in *agnostia* (unknowing), Jones concludes that "Eckhart is here, no doubt, inconsistent."⁶³ Eckhart's statement that "to know God God-fashion, one's knowledge must change into unknowing" is rejected as false by Jones. Jones says of Eckhart's mysticism that "this 'negative' philosophy is no proper or inherent part of mysticism. It belongs to a long and tragic stage of human thinking. I do not want to do anything to perpetuate it. I want to transcend its abstract reality by substituting for it a reality that is self-communicative and concrete."⁶⁴

D. THE MYSTICAL POETS OF ENGLAND AND AMERICA

Rufus Jones was a student of Professor George Santayana of Harvard University in the year 1900-1901. Jones probably heard Santayana teach something akin to what he was later to publish in his *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*:

Religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.⁶⁵

Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence...⁶⁶

From this viewpoint it is but a short step to Jones's belief that there were British and American poets who were thoroughly mystical. He declares that "almost every English poet has been mystical, from Richard Rolle to Christina Rossetti and Francis Thompson."⁶⁷ For Jones, the English poets who spoke "to the age out of eternity" were Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning. In *Some Exponents of Mystical Religion*, in a chapter entitled "Mysticism in Robert Browning," Browning is lauded as a poet of affirmation,⁶⁸ embodying optimism and courage. According to Jones, he was a mystic because he had had a first-hand experience of God.⁶⁹ Jones feels that Browning's concept of the soul was also the same as Eckhart's.⁷⁰ And for Jones, Browning's mysticism was superior to Tennyson's because it was free of trance and ecstasy.⁷¹

Concerning mystical poets in America, Jones chooses Walt Whitman as his paradigm. Dr. R. M. Bucke and Ralph Waldo Emerson regarded Whitman as the mystical poet par excellence and as one who had reached the level of "cosmic consciousness." Jones believes that Whitman had experienced mystical insights many times in his life and that the capacity for cosmic identification was present in him. Jones also takes pleasure in pointing out that Whitman was closely related to the Quaker tradition from his youth. Jones says of Whitman, "Whether the young man was a mystic or not, the old gray poet certainly is.... [He] has made his contacts with a World that finger-tips do not touch. He has discovered, not new islands or a new continent, but, rather, a whole new universe of Life and Spirit."⁷²

It is quite understandable that Rufus Jones would view Whitman as a great mystical poet, as he had achieved a passionate communion with levels of life deeper than those with which we usually deal. It is also understandable how an advocate of the mysticism of the negative way, Aldous Huxley, would come to the totally different conclusion that "the nineteenth century could tolerate only false, ersatz mysticisms — the nature-mysticism of Wordsworth; the sublimated sexual mysticism of Whitman."⁷³

The antithesis of the position of George Santayana and Rufus Jones can be found in the writings of Mark Schorer on Blake.⁷⁴ Where Santayana developed the similarities between mystical religion and spiritual poetry, Schorer analyzes the distinctions between the poetic vision and mysticism. Schorer finds that

as the value of vision is the central fact in Blake's religion and aesthetics, so the sanctity of personality, individuality, is the central fact of his philosophy. The mystic silences the faculties and expels personality. Blake exalts personality and demands that it reintegrate its faculties. Sometimes Blake's language seems to be identical with that of the mystics; but his meaning is usually opposite.⁷⁵

Schorer concludes, in direct opposition to Santayana, that "poetry is inadequate to the full mystical experience, and the mystical experience is inadequate to a full poetry."⁷⁶ Poetical insights may be about some phase of mysticism; however, they are not mysticism but poetical. If God is like a circle, then the mystic travels to the center and the poet to the periphery. The affirmation mystic often uses language in the rich, multi-dimensional way distinctive of poetry, in order to intuit the mystical unitary vision of nature. However, the poetic experience differs profoundly from negative mysticism. Carol Murphy says that "poets, as a rule, follow the Affirmative Way; the ascetic mystics, the Negative Way."⁷⁷ I am in agreement with Wilmer Cooper, who in his dissertation on Rufus Jones declares that "in some respects Rufus Jones was more of a poet than a metaphysician."⁷⁸ Cooper draws parallels between Tennyson's verse and Jones's prose⁷⁹ and indeed they are very much alike.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the demonstrable evidence of interconnection between Quakers and mystics, which Jones emphasizes, is truly quite thin. Jones hypothesizes the probability of unconscious adoption of currents of thought. He finds connections between the mystics and the poets and the Quakers because he

was searching for them rather than because they were really there. He relies too heavily on persuasion by analogy. He finds interdependence because of similarity of belief and metaphor. But mainly he sees mystics, Quakers, and poets through mystical spectacles, regarding them as affirmation mystics regardless of their vision or spiritual path.

We must take note that in the revised editions of William C. Braithwaite's standard history of Quakerism, the introductions to the first two volumes written by Rufus Jones have been deleted. L. Hugh Doncaster in the foreword to the revised edition of Braithwaite's first volume, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, states that "recent studies have . . . put Quakerism in a rather different light" from what Jones understood it to be.⁸⁰ What this means is that, where Jones's "Introduction" linked Quakerism to the mystical movements of the Continent and England, more recent scholarship has established other origins of Quakerism. Frederick Tolles, in the "Introduction" to Braithwaite's second volume, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, cites the findings of Nathan Söderblom and "his German disciple Friedrich Heiler" for "the crucial distinction between mystical and prophetic religion"⁸¹ as the reason why Jones's "Introduction" was dropped.

The religious thought of Rufus Jones reveals a compound of nineteenth-century liberal religion and a theology whose origins lie in the Greek, Platonic tradition. Jones's intellectual framework is Hellenistic while his spiritual heritage is biblical and Hebraic. Ever since Matthew Arnold, we have been aware that Christian thought is a compound of these two elements, the Hellenic and the Hebraic. The Quaker faith also shares this dual ancestry. In the earlier years of this century Jones re-emphasized the Greek or mystical side of the Quaker tradition. More recent explorations have given us a new appreciation of the Hebraic or prophetic component of early Quakerism. Jones made his reinterpreted Quakerism intellectually respectable and attractive by attempting to graft it onto the Greek metaphysical tradition of mysticism and by injecting into it affirmations of positive thinking and of the social gospel, thus bringing it into line with late nineteenth-century religious liberalism.

In conclusion I must say about Rufus Jones's "affirmation mysticism" that it is not mysticism at all. He likes neither the word "mysticism" nor the methods associated with it. What Jones's religious thought affirms is the sacred dimension in man, i.e., his spiritual aspirations. Jones's "affirmation mysticism" glorifies the mystical experiences of man and rejects the metaphysical type of mysticism of Clement, Eckhart, Plotinus, Schorer, Huxley, and Heiler.

Notes

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2. Lewis Benson, "'That of God in Every Man' — What Did George Fox Mean by It?", *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (Spring 1970), pp. 17-19 (hereafter referred to as Benson, "That of God").
3. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946) (hereafter referred to as Nuttall, *Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith*).
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6. Rufus M. Jones, *The Testimony of the Soul* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 200 n. 2 (hereafter referred to as Jones, *Testimony*).
7. Rufus M. Jones, *The Flowering of Mysticism: The Friends of God in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 26 (hereafter referred to as Jones, *Flowering*).
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12. Rufus M. Jones, "Mystical Experience," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 169 (May 1942), p. 641.
13. Rufus M. Jones, *The Luminous Trail* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), pp. 11-13.
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16. Rufus M. Jones, "Introduction," in *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, by William C. Braithwaite (London: Macmillan and Co., 1923), p. xxxiv.
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18. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
20. John Nickalls, *Some Quaker Portraits, Certain and Uncertain* (London: Friends' Historical Society, 1958), p. 7.
21. Rufus M. Jones, *George Fox, Seeker and Friend* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), p. 23 (title of chapter III).
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23. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
24. Rufus M. Jones, "A Call to a New Installment of Heroic Spirit," *Friends Intelligencer*, Vol. 105 (July 17, 1948), p. 409; this was the last paper written by Jones, shortly before his death.
25. Lewis Benson, "The Resettlement of Prophetic Quakerism: A Statement of the Concern behind the Woolman Settlement Project," in *Introducing Woolman Settlement* (Mount Holly, N.J.: Woolman Settlement Committee, n.d. [1943]), p. 3 (hereafter referred to as Benson, "Prophetic Quakerism").
26. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
27. Rachel Hadley King, *George Fox and the Light Within, 1650-1660* (Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, 1940), p. 87 n. 32.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
29. Nuttall, *Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith*, pp. 41-42.
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31. Howard H. Brinton, *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism: The Beliefs of Fox, Barclay, and Penn, As Based on the Gospel of John* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1973), p. 56.
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42. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
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57. Jones, *Studies*, p. 238.
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