

9-2019

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Recommended Citation

Randazzo, Christy (2019) "Affirmation Mysticism: The Activist Theology of Rufus Jones," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 133 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol133/iss1/3>

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AFFIRMATION MYSTICISM: THE ACTIVIST THEOLOGY OF RUFUS JONES

CHRISTY RANDAZZO

INTRODUCTION

In 1917, the American Friends Service Committee was formed as a unified effort across the Anglo-American Friends world to respond to the ravages of the First World War. Rufus Jones was only one, amongst many, who devoted significant time and attention to that effort. Jones was the person selected as the Committee's first Chairman, however, and remained its Honorary Chairman until his death in 1948.¹ Jones's prominent status amongst Friends internationally both as a writer and a weighty Friend influenced this choice. While his academic work likely played a role in building his "weight" amongst Friends, much of it was also driven by the reputation Jones gained as a spokesman for Friends. This was linked to his intentional project of re-unifying Friends, divided during the multiple schisms of the nineteenth century, with his theology of divine/human interdependence through the Inward Light.

Admittedly, the legacy of this unifying work is now considered to be controversial as well as problematic from a historical perspective. However, his role as chairman could not fail to ensure that his theological work would make a significant impact upon the foundational theology of AFSC. Jones examined the ethical and practical elements underlying the founding, and subsequent work, of AFSC during the period 1917-1919 in his historical work, *A Service of Love In War Time: American Friends Relief Work in Europe, 1917-1919*.² However, he did not actually explicate his vision of divine/human interdependence, and its implications for the interdependence of all humans within society and Quaker social testimony, in general, in *A Service of Love In War Time*. He also did not explore the implications for informing the "why" of Quaker relief work specifically, and little

if any subsequent theological work has been done examining this connection.

This paper addresses this lacuna as the first step of a future, multi-faceted work re-examining the theology of Rufus Jones from the perspective of its impact on laying the foundations for Liberal Quaker theological thought, and the implication of his theology on both current and future Liberal Quaker theological developments. I first chart some foundational elements of Jones's understanding of the role of the Incarnation on establishing a relationship of interdependence between humanity and the Divine, through the lens of what he termed "affirmation mysticism." I transition towards a development of Jones's understanding of interdependence within the Divine. Finally, I chart out the implications of these ideas on Jones's social theology, and the role of interdependence in shaping Quaker testimony.

"AFFIRMATION MYSTICISM" AND INTERDEPENDENT INCARNATION

Jones insisted on delineating what he understood as a dichotomy between "negative" and "affirmative" mysticism, with mysticism encompassing all aspects of human engagement with the Divine as well as any subsequent relationship which developed as a result of these interactions.³ Jones termed "negative" any interaction which focused mainly on silencing the individual's sensory experience and which removed the human from relationship with human community by being absorbed in God, or "swallowed up in the Godhead."⁴ Jones dismissed this pursuit on both theological and ethical grounds, as he understood it to violate the Christian call to be in community, an incalculable loss, with the only benefit being the individual gain of a life united entirely, and only, with God the infinite.⁵ Jones contrasted this with his "affirmation mysticism" formulation, which he understood to be the counterpoint to negation due to its insistence on uniting with the infinite/finite God within the finite, specifically the grittiness of daily life. Jones claimed that while there are transcendent elements of affirmation mysticism, including "mystical visions," these were only a starting point for affirmation mysticism, and were not the end of the mystic's pursuit of a relationship with the divine. Jones instead claimed that the affirmation mystic understood that the vision is simply the beginning of a relationship, God's opening to a deeper relationship, but that, as he claimed, "those who would have a closer

view of the Divine must seek it in a life of love and sacrifice.”⁶ In this way, Jones married what he understood to be the two main elements of the Quaker life: the human opening to the Divine through waiting patiently upon God to speak to the individual in community, and the social action which that divine engagement would compel within the human. Thus, by emphasizing the worship and activist, social elements of Quakerism above all others, Jones was able to frame Quakerism as inherently “mystical,” through a definition of mysticism which “affirmed” the lived, human experience.

It must be noted that Jones is certainly reflecting a concern already extant within his context and time. Liberal religion at the turn of the twentieth century was strongly influenced by the social reform emphasis of the time, including the Social Gospel movement, as well as a skepticism of ecstatic expressions of Divine presence.⁷ What separated Jones from his Liberal contemporaries is his insistence on bracketing off an understanding of mysticism that bridged Liberal hermeneutics and concerns with the mystical foundations of Quakerism — which arguably had far more in common with the “negation mysticism” that Jones rejected — towards the goal of establishing mysticism as the core, common, and unifying element of a twentieth century Quakerism.

While Jones’s biases certainly blinded him, and likely led him to develop what I argue is an incomplete understanding of the history of Christian mysticism, his understanding of how to frame Quakerism to fit his context was unparalleled. Not only is Jones’s definition of mysticism the most commonly accepted one amongst current Liberal Quakers, his “affirmation mysticism” has heavily influenced Liberal Quaker social action, and Liberal Quaker theological reflection on that social action. A key element in that theological reflection has been Jones’s insistence that humans are already in an interdependent relationship with the Divine, without the need to engage in any practices of self-abnegation to “clear out the human” in order to connect directly with the Divine.⁸

Dialogically, this both shaped, and was shaped by, Jones’s strongly incarnational Christology. As a Quaker, Jones’s theology had been shaped by the consistent theological conviction that “every human life partakes of God.”⁹ Jones’s Liberal reading of Quaker tradition led him to understand George Fox’s experience of the Divine as, what he termed, a “continuous sense of the Divine life enfolding his own.” This is an experience which, as Jones admits, is never stated as such

anywhere within Fox's journal, but which is certainly strongly implied — or so Jones argues.¹⁰ This “continuous state” of God's enfolding presence within human life is not entirely without warrant within Christian theology however, especially when one takes seriously the Christian claim to Christ as the Divine incarnate within humanity.

Jones did, indeed, take this claim seriously, and took this incarnation to its logical conclusion, or at least logical to a Quaker formed by a vision of the Light of Christ actively present within every single human, continuously inviting the human into deeper relationship.¹¹ Jones placed strong emphasis on a close reading of the Apostle Paul, particularly Paul's imagery of the closely interconnected relationship between Christ and humanity within the letters to the Corinthians (1st and 2nd), and Ephesians. This reading gave Jones scriptural warrant for his understanding of the interdependence between the incarnate Christ and humanity. Again, Jones is not engaging in a complex game of eisegesis with this effort, to be completely fair: Christian tradition emphasizes that through Christ's human nature all of creation is capable of being in relationship with the Divine. This establishes the path along which Jones can create a doctrine of God as interdependent with humanity. In many ways, Jones can be said to be a confessional theologian, and an apologist: not only was his reading of scripture and Quaker theological history deeply bound by his identity as a Quaker in a specific context, he felt a very insistent calling to develop theology to serve that context and community. I argue that he needed to locate a very specific definition of mysticism within the Christian and Quaker traditions in order to serve the confessional framework he was developing, and with affirmation mysticism, he found exactly what he needed.

INTERDEPENDENT GOD

Through the image of Christ, the being which straddled the Divine and the human, Jones establishes the process through which God develops an interdependence upon humanity. First, Jones demonstrated that by straddling the seemingly insurmountable divide between Divine and human, Jesus establishes himself as the channel through which God reaches out to humans, and pulls humans back through the channel into an intimate relationship with the Divine. As incarnation transforms human existence into something which is capable of being completely inhabited by the Divine, humans are incomplete until they

can live in relationship with the Divine.¹² Next, through Christ, the Divine experiences everything which humans experience, including and especially the suffering of human existence in its entirety.¹³ This establishes the foundational aspect of interdependent relationship: what one experiences, the other experiences, and thus are both bound in mutual experience. This roots Jones firmly in Quaker tradition, which has always emphasized the personal experience of the Divine as the primary element of Quakerism.¹⁴ Finally, through the working of the Divine within the human person, the human is perfected through the process of the Divine changing the human into the image of God, the inward self which is from henceforth “always at home with the Lord.”¹⁵

The theological implications of this progression are profound. For one, Jones claims that God suffers as humans suffer, meaning that eliminating human suffering is both a human *and* a Divine imperative. Second, Jones argues that humans are created to be incomplete without the presence of God. Yet, this does not presume that humans are capable of ever *actually* existing without the presence of God within. Instead, they are in relationship proleptically with the Divine, their relationship being existent foundationally, in that to be human ontologically is to be in relationship with the Divine. This is explained in Jones’s formulation that “it is impossible to make immanence intelligible without *transcendence*, even in the case of our personal spirits,” by which Jones appears to mean the individual human soul, that which makes the human recognizably human — as opposed to the Spirit of God.¹⁶

Third, Jones envisions a panentheistic Divine, a Spirit who is both immanent within and transcendent beyond the world, who is, as Jones states, the “Ground and Source of all we can call Mind or Reason in the universe.”¹⁷ A God who experiences everything that humans experience is a God who experiences what EVERY human experiences. If all humans are bound to a God whose incarnation in the world makes the world closer to God, this binding also makes Godself closer to the entire world, enfolding the entire world within the Divine. Thus, the panentheistic God brings all of humanity into relationship with the entire creation, destroying boundaries, opening the horizon for new possibilities for humanity. This brings with it a rippling of consequence for humans individually, however: human interconnection.

SOCIAL THEOLOGY

The ethical implications to this interconnection are clear: when you make any human suffer, you also make God suffer, an untenable situation crying out for remedy. Yet, as God is present throughout the entire creation, and within humans as the Inner Light (the term which Jones preferred, and through his continuous use, aided in its spread amongst Liberal Friends), then harm to any one human is untenable as it carries with it a tripartite harm: to the human as themselves (human), to the human as a part of the Light (Divine), and to the human as a member of humanity (human and Divine). Jones understood the human person to be an individual only as they are a member of the created order, and thus only as they are a member of the interdependent community of God and the creation. Their personhood existed through connection to others, or as he stated, “personality at every stage involves interrelation.”¹⁸

This is the final step of this process which begins with God’s creation of a human who requires relationship with God, and a God who in turn desires relationship with every human. Through God, humans are interconnected to each other. As humans cannot be truly human without relationship with God, through God humans cannot be truly human unless they are in interconnected relationship with other humans.¹⁹ In other words, following Jones down the rabbit hole here leads to the inevitable conclusion that humans do not seek to free humans from oppressive structures of war, famine, and homelessness — the work that AFSC initially did for millions of refugees of the war — simply out of obligation to God, or even only to aid other humans in need. In fact, I argue that the most radical implication of Jones’s theology is that humans do relief work *because they are human*, because failing to serve the other is to fail as a human person, and it is only through service to the other that the self truly becomes the self. Jones therefore requires an “affirmation” framework of mysticism because it allows no room for any miscommunication about the intent of the human engagement with the Divine: to force the human to always understand themselves as in community, of community, and as bound by the needs of community.²⁰ Whether Jones truly failed to grasp the true intent of the mystics he termed “negative” — to leave nothing between the human and God in order to then return back to the world ready to do the work of Christ within the world — is certainly debatable, I contend. However, I think that it is obvious that Jones wanted to leave very little doubt about his theological

anthropology, and its implications in the world, and he was willing to frame his arguments to achieve that end. Jones's understanding of Quaker testimony, and the social responsibilities of Quakers, were rooted in this anthropological foundation and stemmed from it. AFSC is thus the inevitable, and necessary, living out of his theological convictions. Finally, I argue that Jones thus establishes a vision of Quaker ethics that is neither deontological nor virtuous, but is instead ontological: an ethic which is actually an outgrowth of the human person living the most complete human life possible.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I lay out what I argue are the anthropological underpinnings of Jones's vision of Quaker testimony and social witness. These include four key elements: 1) what I argue is a constructed conception of an affirmation mysticism which assumed an active human engagement with God, and through God, back to community, 2) the interdependent Christology upon which this construction of mysticism rested, 3) the overarching framework of an interdependent God which provides the Christology with meaning, and finally 4) a theology of engaged social witness which is ontological, rooted in Jones's contention that humans are truly human only when they serve the other, enacting a radical action of communal interdependence.

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ENDNOTES

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2. Jones, *A Service of Love In War Time: American Friends Relief Work in Europe, 1917-1919*
3. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 140-41.
4. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 149-50.
5. Jones, *New Studies in Mystical Religion*, 79-80.
6. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 149-53.
7. Daniel E. Bassuk, "Rufus Jones and Mysticism", 23-24.
8. Jones, *The Testimony of the Soul*, 152-3.
9. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 165.
10. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 163.
11. Jones, *The World Within*, 33.
12. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 253.
13. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 101.
14. Jones, *The New Quest*, 125
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17. Jones, *The New Quest*, 186.
18. Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, 58.
19. Jones, *New Studies in Mystical Religion*, 170
20. Jones, *New Studies in Mystical Religion*, 171.