

The Enigma of Humanism in the Transformational Mysticism of Rufus Jones

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Abstract

Rufus Jones has the intriguing distinction of being associated with both humanism and mysticism. One way to resolve this apparent paradox is to adopt Hugh Rock's recent interpretation of Jones' mysticism as essentially a logical appropriation of ethical principles. My survey of Jones' extensive corpus and archival letters suggests, though, that he understood mysticism as an experiential relationship with a personal God that led to transformation. I argue that it is the association with humanism that is misleading, because the transformation of the individual and society that Jones envisaged is not effected by humans alone but is divinely inspired and enabled. I conclude that the mysticism/humanism paradox exists because, although both elements are present in Jones' writings, the humanistic element needs to be seen in relation to Jones' wider theistic framework.

Keywords

humanism, mysticism, social action, spiritual practices, transformation

Introduction

It is with good reason that the name Rufus Jones is almost synonymous with mysticism. He has been credited with (or accused of) interpreting Quakerism as a mystical religion; he wrote prolifically on the history, benefits and pitfalls of mysticism; he aligned himself personally with the mystical tradition in his autobiographical essay 'Why I Enroll with the Mystics'; and mysticism was often an element of meetings that emerged where Jones was read or heard.¹ He is also

1 Jones, R. M., 'Why I Enroll with the Mystics', in Ferm, V. (ed.), *Contemporary American Theology*, New York: Round Table Press, 1932, Vol. 1, pp. 191–215. For the influence of

associated with (or accused of) various brands of humanism. Guy Aiken, for example, notes that Jones was often labelled a ‘mere’ humanist; Douglas Gwyn associates him with an ‘optimistic’ humanism that was inadequate for a nuclear age; Hugh Rock claims that he embraced ‘religious’ humanism; and Kathryn Damiano complains that, as a result of Jones, Liberal Quakerism tends to be ‘self-sufficient, humanistic and individualistic’.²

There has never been a consensus on the definition of mysticism, but within Western Christianity it often has connotations of humility and dependence on a personal deity. Evelyn Underhill, for example, sees mysticism in terms of an overwhelming, transformative love of God.³ Humanism, on the other hand, which likewise eludes concise definition, has, as the above quotations suggest, connotations of human self-sufficiency. There are, then, some understandings of mysticism that sit uneasily with humanism, a conundrum that I term the mysticism/humanism paradox and that begs for explanation in relation to Rufus Jones.

In a recent article, Hugh Rock addressed a related paradox, asking how Jones could be associated with mysticism even though he ‘did not like the mystical tradition’.⁴ Rock’s solution to his paradox is to retain Jones’ association with humanism but to offer a novel interpretation of Jones’ mysticism, namely as a logical appreciation of an ethical ‘fifth dimension’, where the fifth dimension is John Hick’s term for a level of reality not accessible to normal states of consciousness.⁵ Jones, concludes Rock, was moving towards a ‘fully humanist basis for religion’ in which talk of God was ‘retained as a gloss on the humanism’.⁶ If Rock’s analysis is correct, then it also solves my mysticism/humanism paradox. If Jones’ mysticism is essentially non-theistic in the sense that it does not involve a relationship with a personal God, then humanism and mysticism can exist in tandem. The validity of this solution, though, rests on how well it captures Jones’ understanding of mysticism.

The problem is that Rock’s conclusion above is difficult to reconcile with Jones’ assertion in *Social Law in the Spiritual World* that a mystic is someone who ‘feels

Jones on new meetings, see P. Appelbaum, ‘Protestant Mysticism: pacifists and the “practice of the presence”’, *Quaker History* 94 (2005), pp. 1–24.

2 Aiken, G., ‘Who Took the Christ out of Quakerism? Rufus Jones and the person and work of Christ’, *Quaker Religious Thought* 116 (2011), pp. 37–53 (p. 44); Gwyn, D., *Apocalypse of the Word: the life and message of George Fox (1624–1691)*, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986, p. 215; Rock, H., ‘Rufus Jones Never Did Establish that Quakerism is a Mystical Religion’, *Quaker Studies* 21 (2016), pp. 49–66 (p. 49); Damiano, K., ‘On Earth as it is in Heaven: eighteenth century Quakerism as realized eschatology’, PhD thesis, The Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities, Cincinnati, OH, 1988, p. 64.

3 Underhill, E., *Mysticism*, 12th edn, New York: Meridian, 1974, p. 68.

4 Rock, H., ‘Rufus Jones’, p. 50.

5 Rock, ‘Rufus Jones’, p. 57.

6 Rock, ‘Rufus Jones’, p. 61.

his relationship to the Infinite' (italics as in original).⁷ This suggests that Jones understood mysticism as an affective rather than a purely logical response, and that God, far from being a gloss, is someone with whom mystics have a relationship. I will argue that Jones' wider corpus and personal correspondence cohere with the above assertion in *Social Law*: namely, contra Rock, that mysticism for Jones is an experiential relationship with a personal God.

My solution to the mysticism/humanism paradox is to retain the above understanding of Jones' mysticism as a relationship with God but to argue that any attribution of humanism needs to be used with the qualifier 'theistic'. Jones promoted a type of mysticism that resulted in a two-fold transformation—of the individual (who grew in virtues such as love, gentleness and goodness) and of society (often seen in terms of building the kingdom of God). Although he saw this double transformation as involving human effort and human reason, ultimately it had its origin in God, who both guided the individual and gave strength for the task at hand. I suggest that the apparent paradoxical juxtaposition of humanism and mysticism arises partly because 'mysticism' and 'humanism' are open to multiple interpretations and partly because some commentators emphasise the humanistic strand that is undoubtedly present in Jones' writing but fail to put this in the wider context of his worldview, which drew heavily on Christianity and which saw God as an inherent part of human nature.

Note that my suggestion that Jones is misinterpreted regarding humanism because his work has to be considered as a whole has a precedent. Violet Holdsworth, a close friend of the Jones family, must have taken him to task in 1944 about an ambiguous statement in one of his books that could be misinterpreted as embracing humanism. Jones addressed her concern in a letter:

Thou art quite right in criticizing my statement on p. 135 of 'The Radiant Life' that the 'spiritual universe has man's soul for the center'. It is a very loose statement and if it were taken out of its setting in the book it would give a wholly wrong impression. The entire book is evidence that I do not hold for a minute the Naturalistic-humanistic view.⁸

The humanism/mysticism paradox is important because it impinges on at least two other areas. The first is the vexed question of whether Jones thought Quakerism should be Christian. An association of Jones with Christian mysticism favours (but does not necessarily imply) a 'yes'; one with humanism favours (but again does not necessarily imply) a 'no'. I do not consider this issue here, but a comprehensive discussion can be found in Guy Aiken's paper 'Who took the Christ out of Quakerism?'⁹ The second area is the perennial question of the relationship between spiritual practices and human effort, often discussed

7 Jones, R. M., *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, London: Headley Brothers, 1904, p. 142.

8 Letter from Rufus Jones to Violet Holdsworth, 9 November 1944, Rufus M. Jones Papers, Haverford Libraries, Box 59.

9 Aiken, 'Who Took the Christ out of Quakerism?', p. 49.

in terms of the balance between action and contemplation found in the story of Martha and Mary in Lk. 10. Jones, as we will see, insisted that spiritual practices and human effort were mutually reinforcing.

The plan of this article is as follows. In Section 1 I draw on Jones' extensive corpus and archival letters to present some characteristics of his understanding of mysticism, showing that the consistent picture that emerges is one of a transformative relationship with a personal God. Then, by considering Jones' views of conscience as having both a divine and a human aspect, I argue that the human effort that is undoubtedly involved in this transformation needs to be seen as being initiated and enabled by God. In Section 2 I approach the mysticism/humanism paradox from another angle, exploring the relationship between spiritual practices and human effort. Here I argue that Jones' personal practices reflect a reliance on God for transformation that refutes accusations of a 'mere' or 'self-sufficient' humanism. Furthermore, I suggest that Jones' alignment with Liberal Christianity's emphasis on the ability of humans to transform themselves and society in the early twentieth century, an emphasis fostered in part by a fascination with psychology, needs to be seen in terms of how he thought that psychology could reveal God.

1. The Theory: Transformational Mysticism and the Role of Conscience

Research into Jones and mysticism has proceeded along several lines. Earlier studies critiqued Jones' interpretation of the origins of Quakerism as lying in Continental mysticism.¹⁰ More recently, the focus has been on the history of religion. Hedstrom has explored how Jones' books made mysticism middlebrow, for example, and Schmidt has considered Jones' popularisation of the term 'seeker' within the grand sweep of the development of American spiritual culture.¹¹ The fact that Rock can define Jones' mysticism in a way that seems to contradict the above statement in *Social Law*, however, suggests that there is still work to be done in the basic task of clarifying what Jones meant by the term.

Part of the difficulty in clarification lies in the fact that mysticism is a notoriously slippery concept. As far back as 1899 William Inge listed 26 definitions in the Appendix of *Christian Mysticism*, while acknowledging that 'the list might be made much longer'.¹² The huge surge of interest in the subject at the beginning of the twentieth century did little to bring consensus, and definitions of and approaches to mysticism proliferated. The Transcendentalists, for example, were sundering mysticism from Christian understandings, a process accelerated by the

10 See, e.g., Bassuk, D. E., 'Rufus Jones and Mysticism', *Quaker Religious Thought* 46 (1978), pp. 4–26.

11 Hedstrom, M. S., 'Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses', *Cross Currents* 54 (2003), pp. 31–44; Schmidt, L. E., *Restless Souls: the making of American spirituality*, 2nd edn, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 230–38.

12 Inge, W. R., *Christian Mysticism*, London: Methuen, 1899, p. 335.

discovery of mystical traditions in Eastern religions.¹³ Furthermore, the major Western scholars of mysticism, William Inge, Evelyn Underhill, Friedrich von Hügel, William James and Rudolf Otto, all had different views on what mysticism entailed and how it could be cultivated. Underhill, for instance, saw the stigmata as a genuine mystical experience, whereas Jones viewed it with suspicion.¹⁴ (Jones, as we will see, disliked any definitions that associated mysticism with esoteric experiences, complaining that they give the impression that mysticism relates to ‘claptrap and mental rubbish’.¹⁵)

To this general ambiguity we can add the particular problems associated with trying to ascertain what Jones himself meant by mysticism. Jones wrote in a popular style, for, as he put it, the ‘wayfaring man’, rather than for academics, and thus eschewed ‘technical terms’.¹⁶ Moreover, Punshon concludes that it is a mistake to look for a precise definition of mysticism from Jones, because his understanding ‘was alive and growing and not really the sort of subject suitable for abstract formulae’.¹⁷ However, while it is true that Jones did not offer a formal definition and that his understanding was alive in the sense that it was practice that was important, the way he characterises and describes mysticism across his corpus is fairly consistent.¹⁸ Below I discuss two of the main characteristics of his mysticism: first, that it is an experiential relationship with a personal God; and, second, that it transforms both the individual and society.

1.1 Mysticism is an Experience of a Personal God

In *Social Law*, as noted, a mystic is someone who ‘feels his relationship to the Infinite’.¹⁹ This aspect of Jones’ understanding never wavers. In *Studies in Mystical Religion*, for example, mysticism is ‘the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence’,²⁰ and in his article ‘Jewish Mysticism’, Jones states that in all religions the ‘fundamental fact of first-hand mystical experience’

13 For a review, see Schmidt, L. E., ‘The Making of Modern “Mysticism”’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2003), pp. 273–302.

14 Underhill criticises Jones’ view in *Mysticism*, p. 267.

15 Jones, R. M., *Testimony of the Soul*, New York: MacMillan, 1937, p. 200.

16 Jones, *Social Law*, p.15.

17 Punshon, J., *Portrait in Grey: a short history of the Quakers*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1984, p. 227.

18 In the preface to the French edition of *A Dynamic Faith*, 41 years after the original was published in 1901, for example, Jones maintains that the book still represents his religious outlook (Vining, E. Gray, *Friend of Life. The biography of Rufus M. Jones*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1958, p. 84). The exception is his views on to what extent mystical experiences were universal. Perhaps in response to complaints by readers such as William Littleboy, who claimed never to have had an experience of God, Jones does at times seem to waver here and to soften the claim for universality.

19 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 142.

20 Jones, R. M., *Studies in Mystical Religion*, London: MacMillan, 1909, p. xv.

is 'the direct encounter with the living revealing God in the depths of the soul'.²¹ These experiences are only rarely ecstatic, he claims, but include the 'powerful testimony of inward peace which many a soul knows, even though no special claim of mystical experience is made'.²²

Jones' association of mysticism with an experience of God was not unusual at the time. A writer in the *Church Quarterly Review* in 1906, for example, linked the two by declaring that 'mysticism' and a 'craving for spiritual experiences' had 'run mad' in the United States.²³ Furthermore, Jones was friends with all the major scholars of mysticism noted above, and although they disagreed on some points, there is no indication that they differed in respect of this emphasis on experience. Jones certainly appreciated Otto's work, for example, commenting that 'Rudolf Otto has put all contemporary religious students into his debt through his extremely important book, *Das Heilige*'.²⁴ My point here is that Otto's book explores numinous experience, which involves a sense of awe and 'otherness' but also a fascination with and attraction to the numen. Affective experience is also apparent in Inge's understanding: he defined mysticism as 'the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal',²⁵ and identified its goal as 'a living object of love, a God who draws souls like a magnet'.²⁶ Inge enthused to Jones in a letter that he read all of his books and found himself 'in ever growing sympathy with the type of Christianity professed by the Society of Friends'.²⁷ He is unlikely to have made this unsolicited comment if they had differed on the importance of experience.

For Jones, these mystical experiences of God are deeply personal. This is fundamentally because God is personal: God is, for Jones, 'the eternal Personal Self'.²⁸ '[N]o religion can be adequate which does not focus on a personal God', he insisted in a letter, 'Nothing else will ever be satisfactory or sufficient for us, I am sure'.²⁹ Furthermore, the relationship with God calls forth a personal response from the individual. Thus, in *Testimony of the Soul*, Jones is surely drawing on his own experience when he says that God is 'a warm and intimate Person whose reality makes our hearts tingle'.³⁰ An individual, he says, 'recognizes the divine guest and answers back with the joyous cry of *Abba*'.³¹ Likewise, in *The Beginnings*

21 Jones, R. M., 'Jewish Mysticism', *The Harvard Theological Review* 36 (1943), pp. 155–63 (p. 156).

22 Jones, R. M., *New Studies in Mystical Religion*, London: MacMillan, 1927, p. 46.

23 Quoted in Schmidt, L. E., 'Modern mysticism', p. 284.

24 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 55.

25 Inge, W. R., *Christian Mysticism*, London: Methuen, 1899.

26 Inge, W. R., *Wit and Wisdom of Dean Inge* (selected and arranged by J. Marchant), London: Longmans, 1927, p. 5.

27 Letter to Rufus Jones from W. R. Inge, 1925 (no date), Haverford Box 24.

28 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 66.

29 Letter from Rufus Jones to Wilmot V. Metcalf, 24 February 1931, Haverford Box 56.

30 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 122.

31 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 159.

of *Quakerism*, mystical religion is described as the type of religion ‘through which the soul finds itself in a love-relation with the Living God’.³² In *New Studies of Mysticism*, this relationship is put in the context of prayer, during which sometimes ‘there comes a remarkable sense of answer and response’.³³

This emphasis on the personal—namely a personal response to a personal God—resonated with wider movements in liberal theology apparent from Schleiermacher onwards. Jones’ earlier works were written at a time when the personalist idealism associated with Boston philosopher Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910) was influential at Harvard. There are many similarities between Bowne and Jones. Dorrien, for example, notes that Bowne’s personalist school ‘affirmed moral intuition *and* religious experience *and* the social gospel *and* metaphysical reason’.³⁴ Jones did too, and they both asserted that personality is the only metaphysical reality, that life only made sense if the world exists through a mind analogous to the human mind, and that matter cannot cause mind.³⁵ Indeed, it is probably fair to say that Jones was more bullish in drawing out similarities between humans and God than Bowne. Jones, for example, predicted that if we could ‘drop our plummet down through the deeps of one personality’ we would find God, while Bowne cautions that ‘a little reflection warns us against transferring our finite peculiarities and limitations without careful inspection’.³⁶ Jones does not cite Bowne as far as I am aware, but even if he did not read him directly, it is likely that he would have encountered some of Bowne’s ideas at second hand. Elements of Bowne’s personalism can be found in Harvard scholars such as George Herbert Palmer, Josiah Royce and William James;³⁷ Jones studied under the first two during a year of postgraduate study in 1900/01 (James was in Europe preparing the Gifford lectures at the time), and acknowledges all three as having influenced his thinking.³⁸ Certainly, when James Moore wrote his thesis on Jones in 1960, he interviewed a number of prominent theologians about Jones and the picture that emerges is that Jones was controlled by personalistic categories of biblical faith and was very much in line with the prevailing liberal position.³⁹

32 Jones, R. M., Introduction to *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, in *Quakerism, A Spiritual Movement*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Meeting of Friends, 1963, p. 128.

33 Jones, *New Studies*, p. 44.

34 Dorrien, G., ‘Making Liberal Theology Metaphysical: personalist idealism as a theological school’, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 24 (2003), pp. 214–44 (p. 215).

35 Dorrien, ‘Making Liberal Theology Metaphysical’.

36 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 66; Bowne, B. P., *Theism*. New York: American Book Company, 1902, p. 170.

37 Dorrien, G., *The Making of American Liberal Theology: imagining progressive religion 1805–1900*. London, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 380.

38 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 21.

39 Moore, J. F., ‘The Ethical Thought of Rufus Matthew Jones, with Special Reference to Biblical influences’, PhD thesis, Boston University Graduate School, Boston, MA, 1960, pp. 297–325.

In spite of his emphasis on the personal, there are occasions when Jones does use impersonal language to describe God. This is perhaps because impersonal terminology was common at the time. The Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to the 'Over-soul' and William James refers to the 'more', for example, but although Jones requisitions both terms in *Social Law* it is clear that he is referring to the Christian, personal God: 'The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God whom we, in our modern quest, want to know, and not another'.⁴⁰ Furthermore, von Hügel and Underhill also used impersonal language, although it is clear from their writing that they envisaged God as personal. One reason for this may have been the influence of pseudo-Dionysius, the unknown fifth-century Syrian monk whose preference for apophatic theology had such a profound influence on the Western mystical tradition.⁴¹

Jones also occasionally discusses mystical experience in impersonal terms. In *The Inner Life* he describes the central aspect of mystical experience as 'the fusion of the self into a larger undifferentiated whole' such that the 'usual dualistic character of consciousness is transcended'.⁴² This description is potentially consistent with Rock's interpretation of Jones' mysticism. Of interest in this respect, though, is a letter that Jones wrote to Wilmot Metcalf, who had presumably attended one of Jones' talks in the early 1930s and queried Jones' description of his experience of worshipping God. Jones' letter attempts to clear up any misunderstanding by stressing his conviction that God was personal:

The one point that I made which seemed a mistake to you was in reference to what was in my mind in moments of worship. As I had been pointing out all through my talk, I feel that there are states of life when one stops thinking and in those highest moments of worship I never have a content of thought and I only meant to say that in such moments I did not think of God as personal, I simply felt the covering of a great Presence that surrounded and invaded me, and no thought beyond that was present. But the moment I interpret my religious life and my religious experience I always interpret it in terms of a personal God.⁴³

In summary, given the wider context of scholarly writing on mysticism that emphasised experience, the general milieu of personalist idealism, the preponderance of passages in Jones that express a personal relationship with God and the proposed explanation here of impersonal descriptions, it is hard to endorse Rock's view of Jones' mysticism as access to the fifth dimension in which language of God is a gloss.

I suggest that the discrepancy between my interpretation and Rock's arises

40 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 33.

41 Brown, R. L., 'The Doctrine of God in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century English Mysticism as Found in Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Evelyn Underhill, and William Inge', PhD thesis, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, 1978, p. 23.

42 Jones, R. M., *The Inner Life*, New York: Macmillan, 1917, p. 185.

43 Letter to Wilmot Metcalf, 24 February 1931, Haverford Box 56.

because Rock has used selected quotations from only three of Jones' works, namely *Social Law*, *Studies in Mystical Religion* and *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*.⁴⁴ This means that he has not engaged with evidence that does not fit his interpretation regarding assessments both of Jones' mysticism and of his wider theological framework. Consider, for example, Rock's assertion that for Jones consciousness is a product of human relationships.⁴⁵ While Jones does indeed link the development of self-consciousness to social influence, it is also the case that he sees consciousness as originating in God: personality, Jones insists, quoting Wordsworth, from the first 'trails clouds of glory'.⁴⁶ What we have when the person appears, he continues, following the idealist philosopher Royce, is 'the self-consciousness of the world manifest at a focus point—a unique expression of the eternal self'.⁴⁷ By considering only one side of Jones' treatment of consciousness, then, Rock overlooks the role of God, which is in turn central to Jones' understanding of mysticism.

In judging which interpretation of mysticism is more representative of Jones' view, consider my and Rock's assessments of Jones' experience at Dieu-le-Fit. Jones gives slightly different accounts in *The Trail of Life in College* and his essay 'Why I Enroll'. In the latter, he recounts that he was taking a solitary walk and pondering his future when 'I felt the walls between the visible and the invisible grow thin and the Eternal seemed to break through into the world where I was'.⁴⁸ Rock, who draws on the former account as given in Vining's biography of Jones, claims that the experience 'does not qualify as mystical in Jones' own terms of reference'.⁴⁹ It does, however, according to my interpretation, because it involves a felt experience of God. Crucially, it is also mystical according to Jones, who specifically says that he is offering this account as 'a type of mystic experience which does not reach the stage of ecstasy'.⁵⁰

1.2 The Divine and Human Elements in Conscience: A Vector of Transformation

Mysticism may be an experience of a personal God, but for Jones the purpose of this experience was to initiate transformation, of society and of the individual. It is here that attributions of secular humanism can arise: if we lose sight of the link between transformation and God then it is easy to gain the impression that individuals can improve both their character and society by their own effort. The relationship that Jones saw between mysticism and transformation therefore needs careful consideration.

The experience of God that Jones held to be basic to mysticism can, he says, be

44 Rock, 'Rufus Jones', p. 49.

45 Rock, 'Rufus Jones', p. 54.

46 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 85.

47 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 85.

48 Jones, 'Why I Enroll', p. 207.

49 Rock, 'Rufus Jones', p. 59.

50 Jones, 'Why I Enroll', p. 206.

associated with two distinct goals and attitudes: those of 'negation' and 'affirmation' (or sometimes 'affirmative') mysticism.⁵¹ Negation mystics aim to become absorbed in God. They hold that God cannot be found in objects, or events in history, or states of consciousness, because these are all finite. They thus aim to transcend the finite, even their own 'self'. As an example, Jones cites Eckhart, whose goal was to experience states of consciousness that approach a blank.⁵² Jones' primary objection to this type of mysticism was that it encourages individuals to live for a rare moment of ecstasy and 'to sacrifice the chance of winning spiritual victory for the hope of receiving an ineffable illumination which would quench all further search or desire'.⁵³ Jones, then, viewed negation mysticism as self-indulgent, as avoiding spiritual struggles and as preventing spiritual progress.

Affirmation mystics also seek an immediate, first-hand sense of God, but, in contrast to negation mystics, as a prelude to action and not as an end in itself: 'More important than vision is obedience to the vision', says Jones.⁵⁴ This is a mysticism of everyday life in the sense that God is found not by negating the finite but *through* the finite.⁵⁵ In fact, all human tasks can become 'glorious' because God is in them.⁵⁶ The goal is 'to become one with God in a conscious union'.⁵⁷ Jones believes that this union involves transformation of will and character such that 'Instead of losing our will we approach that true freedom where we *will* to do His will'.⁵⁸

In his enthusiasm for affirmation mysticism and denigration of negation mysticism, Jones is expressing his conviction that mystical experiences should result in the transformation of the individual and society. Indeed, it is this God-initiated transformation that confirms that the experiences are genuine: 'The highest traits of character we know in God are love, gentleness, tenderness and self-giving grace. Where the meeting of the soul with God brings forth such fruits in the life of a person as those, we may well believe the evidence.'⁵⁹ Society, too, is transformed through God's initiative. In *Testimony*, Jones points to both the historical witness of the 'great mystics', who come back from their high moments with an imperative sense of mission in the world', and the present-day witness of ordinary people, who after contact with the 'central stream of life' have 'an *élan vital* which dynamizes the life of action'.⁶⁰

This emphasis on the transformation of society resonated with the Quaker tradition, as personified by the likes of Elizabeth Fry and Quaker abolitionists.

51 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 148.

52 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 151.

53 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 152.

54 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 153.

55 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 154.

56 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 154.

57 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 155.

58 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 155.

59 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 160.

60 Jones, *Testimony*, pp. 25 and 24.

Jones feted John Woolman in particular, both for his personal transformation and for the related ‘sureness of direction’ that enabled him to transform society by removing the ‘oppressive burdens on human backs’.⁶¹ It also resonated with the Social Gospel movement, the main expression of liberal Protestant Christianity in America in the early twentieth century, which aimed to combine individual transformation with the transformation of society. Jones had contact with the movement through one of its foremost proponents, Francis Greenwood Peabody, a Harvard lecturer with whom he formed a lasting friendship.⁶² What Jones has done, then, is to identify and extoll that facet of mysticism that aimed to reform society, a facet that both resonated with the twentieth-century social gossellers and was apparent in the Quaker tradition.

Of note here is that for Jones the transformation of self and society originate with and are enabled by God. It is possible to see how God’s role may be marginalised, however. If an individual is transformed such that they are so aligned with God’s will that to do God’s will is part of their character, then they may undertake a certain course of action not because they receive a ‘supernatural’ command but because they ‘know’ it to be right on some deep, God-transformed level. Indeed, given that, as noted above, Jones disliked a mysticism that involved ‘ineffable illumination’, one might expect divinely ordained calls to service to be decidedly ordinary.

Rock’s reading of Jones emphasises that the ethical call to action arises from human society: Jones is, in Rock’s term, a ‘Social Theist’.⁶³ Rock’s point is worthy of close consideration because it is, in one sense, true—great and ordinary mystics, as we have seen, reform society and therefore need to know where reform is needed. In order to see how this is only part of the story, though, we need to look at how Jones viewed human nature and, more specifically, conscience.

As noted above, Jones drew on Royce’s idealism to argue that human consciousness was a specific instance of God’s consciousness. The details of his argument need not concern us here, but one manifestation of this inherent relationship between individuals and God is that conscience is, for Jones, a human–divine faculty. The human component is apparent in Jones’ insistence that conscience is formed by the particular social and cultural norms to which an individual is exposed:

each individual’s concrete conscience is ‘formed and filled’ by the social and personal experiences of the lifetime. The atmosphere of the home into which the infant comes ... the habits, traditions, manners, contagious ideas of the family group—all these things begin to form a conscience which will always bear its nurture marks.⁶⁴

61 Jones, R. M., *The Trail of Life in the Middle Years*, New York: Macmillan, 1934, p. 201.

62 Vining, *Friend of Life*, p. 88.

63 Rock, ‘Rufus Jones’, p. 54.

64 Jones, *Social Law*, pp. 122–23.

It also involves reason. In *A Service of Love in Wartime*, for example, Jones discusses the problems that Quakers faced when conscripted. One class of conscientious objectors, not used to thinking through their faith, were satisfied if they themselves did not have to kill. Others, however, objected to the whole system of war. For this latter class, conscience was not a 'mystically-conceived inward voice' that allowed them to be part of the army but not to kill, but rather was 'closely linked with common sense and reason, and with certain definite ideas as to what kind of action makes for progress and perfection of life and what does not'.⁶⁵

This dependence of conscience on culture and reason is, however, only half the story. For Jones, conscience also has a divine component, as demonstrated by the fact that it does not seem to originate with the person: 'when it speaks, the voice does not seem our own. Rightness and wrongness and the sense of oughtness, are deeper than any human plummet can sound.'⁶⁶ Further evidence that this attribute is from God can, for Jones, be found in the fact that all naturalistic attempts to explain it have failed: 'We cannot discover its origin either in the race or in the individual.'⁶⁷ The full picture, then, is that conscience is neither wholly human nor wholly divine, but merges the human and the divine.

This divine-human conscience is associated with transformation on two levels. The first is that an individual is transformed by listening to their conscience, in part because they become better at hearing God. Jones expresses this charmingly in one of his children's books. It seemed to Noah, writes Jones, that sometimes 'he could hear a quiet voice speaking inside and telling him what to do, and when he heard it he would always do what it told him, and just because he did this, little by little he grew so that he could hear the quiet voice better and better.'⁶⁸ This ability to hear and the habit of obeying conscience in turn transforms society, because it functions as source of divine guidance, as for Woolman and the Quaker conscientious objectors mentioned above. Conscience is thus a divinely instituted inner voice that becomes clearer with obedience, but this voice is informed by society and thoughtful, reasoned consideration of a concrete situation. That is, contra purely naturalistic interpretations, conscience and its associated call to transform society had, for Jones, a divine 'depth' and compulsion.

Note that Jones does not explore, in any depth, the relationship between the human and divine elements of conscience on a metaphysical level. While at times he seems to want to fuse the two elements, such that an individual is transformed (as above), at other times he acknowledges that the human element can be mistaken and offers practical suggestions on how the promptings of conscience can be tested.⁶⁹ Jones' reticence here is perhaps in line with the

65 Jones, R. M., *A Service of Love in Wartime*, New York: Macmillan, 1920, p. 90.

66 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 122.

67 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 99.

68 Jones, R. M., *Stories of Hebrew Heroes*, London: Headley Brothers, 1911, p. 33.

69 Jones, *Social Law*, pp. 179–202.

traditional Quaker ambivalence to theological 'notions', such that he emphasises the practical and experiential aspects of conscience rather than seeking to explain it. However, it has to be admitted that his view of human nature more generally is problematic in that it tends to merge the divine and the human. This is largely owing to the fact that identifying human consciousness with the consciousness of God does not leave Jones much scope to explain what 'is not of God' in human nature. His approach can be contrasted, for example, with the Eastern Orthodox concept of deification, which acknowledges that individuals can be transformed to become more God-like but maintains a distinction between humans and God by distinguishing between the energies and essence of God, such that deification involves partaking in the former but not the latter. It is, I suggest, partly because Jones lacks these types of nuanced theological concepts in regard to human nature that he is sometimes accused of making the soul divine.⁷⁰

To summarise, Jones viewed mysticism as a conscious relationship with a personal God. He does sometimes use impersonal language to describe both God and the experience, but this can be explained by cultural norms and Jones' occasional failure to communicate clearly. Jones' preferred affirmation mysticism is characterised by a double transformation. The individual mystic is transformed, coming to exhibit the 'fruit of the Spirit', and is inspired and strengthened to transform, to a greater or lesser extent, their community. This transformation occurs in part through the divine-human faculty of conscience. Because the individual's conscience is transformed in such a way that they become more aligned with God's character and will, the calls to transform society do not come as a supernatural voice but from an intuitive divinely inspired understanding of what to do in a given situation. Thus, although this double-transformation undoubtedly involves human effort, it is enabled and initiated by God. Affirmation mysticism, then, is consistent with humanism only insofar as that humanism is theistic.

2. The Practice: Spiritual Disciplines and the Role of Habit

Another way of approaching the mysticism/humanism paradox is to ask how, given Jones' stress on transformation, this transformation is actually mediated. If Jones is to be classed as a 'mystic', we might expect to find an emphasis on traditional spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible reading. If he is to be classed as a 'mere humanist', we might expect to find an emphasis on the role of human reason and effort. If, as noted above, God is an integral part of human nature, we might expect both spiritual practices and human effort to be involved.

⁷⁰ Spencer, C. D., *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007, p. 204.

Jones did not write explicitly on his spiritual practices, but here I present evidence garnered from the occasional comments in his correspondence and autobiographical books that he had a rich spiritual life. I then consider his comments on character development that appear to be more humanistic and relate them to his theistic view of the universe itself.

2.1 Jones' Spiritual Practices

There are two difficulties involved in identifying Jones' spiritual practices. The first is a scarcity of material: Vining is correct in her assessment that 'there are no handbooks of mystical training to be found among Rufus Jones' fifty-four book titles.'⁷¹ The second, is, I suggest, the fact that Jones was almost too close to his spiritual practices to see them as such. There is some tension, for example, between his professed dislike of structures and techniques and the occasional comments in autobiographical works that times of silence and Bible study were woven into his daily routine from childhood onwards.

Mysticism, according to Jones, requires effort and attention to flourish: a mystic is 'a person who has cultivated, with more strenuous care and discipline than others have done, the native homing passion of the soul for the Beyond.'⁷² He believed, though, that 'routine cut-and-dried' systems of discipline of the type that forge a mystic such as St John of the Cross were 'too remote from life to be satisfactory ways into the heart of divine reality', and he warned that the meditation technique of Zen Buddhism came with no guarantee that 'at the end of its long hard road there will be the desired meeting place—the Bethel of the soul'.⁷³

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this ambivalence meant that he saw no need for private spiritual practices. Quite the opposite—they were an integral part of everyday life. Jones grew up with days that started with 'a long period of family silent worship' and with the weekly rhythm of attending Quaker meetings; more than that, his whole life was structured around thinking about and trying to hear God.⁷⁴ That these practices had become part of who he was is apparent in his comment that by the time he was 30 he 'had learned the secret of withdrawal from the rush and turmoil of the world into the quiet cell of my inner self'.⁷⁵ Clearly, then, Jones had a vibrant set of transformative spiritual practices that revolved around silence and reflection and were incorporated into his daily routine.

The Bible, too, was important. This is easy to overlook, as biblical references are relatively rare in Jones' books. In fact, though, his worldview was shaped by the Bible. He described his family as 'intensely evangelical', such that family Bible readings took place morning and evening, and Jones began to go to Bible School

71 Vining, *Friend of Life*, p. 260.

72 Jones, *New Studies*, p. 15.

73 Jones, *Testimony*, all quotations on p. 29.

74 Jones, 'Why I Enroll', p. 192.

75 Jones, R. M., *The Trail of Life in College*, New York: MacMillan, 1929, p. 200.

when he was six.⁷⁶ At the age of ten, when he was bedbound for nine months with a badly infected foot, he passed the time by reading the Bible out loud to his grandmother. He had recuperated by the time he got to the New Testament, but says that ‘the Old Testament was the book of my boyhood It gave me my first poetry and my first history, and I got my growing ideas of God from it.’⁷⁷ His familiarity with and love for the Bible are apparent in a slim book of his sermons, which all take the Bible as a starting point.⁷⁸

These practices of prayer and Bible study continued long past childhood, as evidenced by a rare glimpse into Jones’ personal devotional life revealed in a letter that was sent to ‘all young friends’ in 1928 on behalf of the Extension Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. The closing paragraph gives the following advice:

Should we not remember and practice Christs’ [sic] habit of prayer, and recognise the importance He attached to His message? We want to pass on to you the concern expressed recently by our friend Rufus M. Jones that Friends should more actively cultivate the individual devotional life by daily prayer and study of the Scriptures. Let us give God a chance.⁷⁹

Given that in Quaker parlance a ‘concern’ expresses a deep conviction, it seems likely that Jones would have practised what he preached and had what is often termed a daily ‘quiet time’.

Jones’ spiritual practices went beyond these more formal times, however. He recommended ‘[p]reparation through appreciation of *beauty*, learning how to sound the deeps of *love*, formation of purity, gentleness, tenderness of heart’.⁸⁰ In addition, he advocated the ‘fellowship and influence of spiritually contagious persons who, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, unconsciously transmit that Life’.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, Jones also held that Meeting for Worship was essential. He surmised that

There is some subtle telepathy that comes into play in the living silence of a congregation which makes every earnest seeker more quick to feel the presence of God, more acute of inner ear, more tender of heart to feel the bubbling of the springs of life than any one of them would be in isolation.⁸²

76 Jones discusses the role the Bible played in his childhood in Chapter IV ‘Searching the Scriptures’ in Jones, R. M., *Finding the Trail of Life*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926. The comment about his family being intensely evangelical is on p. 66.

77 Jones, *Finding the Trail*, p. 65.

78 Jones, M. H. (ed.), *Thou Dost Open Up My Life: selections from the Rufus Jones collection*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet, 127, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1963.

79 Letter to All ‘Young Friends’ from The Extension Committee, Philadelphia, 21 March 1928. Available from Ancestry.com, US Quaker Meeting Records, 1681–1935 (Haverford College Minutes 1927–1928; collection: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting).

80 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 29.

81 Jones, *Testimony*, p. 30.

82 Jones, *Inner Life*, p. 104.

His conviction that this silence was not merely a secular exercise but possessed spiritual depth is apparent in his warning that there must always be ‘a living nucleus of real worshipers, otherwise the silence is likely to be dead and conventional’.⁸³

Thus, in spite of his protestations, in a very important sense there was spiritual discipline in Jones’ life. He may not have advocated sitting in a particular position, or breathing in a particular way, but there was routine and deliberate intention. Furthermore, he was soaked in biblical ideas about love, service and sacrifice. Perhaps Jones found it difficult to step outside his lifestyle, in which God and the everyday were intertwined, in order to see that what he was doing did involve structure, discipline and assimilated spiritual values.

2.2 *The Role of Human Effort*

In addition to these spiritual practices, Jones clearly recognised the importance of human effort. He records that he realised even as a child that the goodness of character he wanted was ‘not something miraculous that drops into a soul out of the skies, but is rather something which is formed within as one faithfully does his set tasks, and goes to work with an enthusiastic passion to help make other people good’.⁸⁴ Furthermore, he seems always to have been confident in his own abilities. He writes that as a child he was the natural leader of the local farm boys and that he and his friends fostered courage by acts of physical daring such as, literally, skating on thin ice.⁸⁵ A letter to Sallie Coutant in 1886 records that he always liked to win at games, because ‘if one gets used to coming out ahead in little things it is easier in larger things.’⁸⁶ Some years later, a letter to Elizabeth Bartram expresses caution about humility, that character trait usually esteemed by mystics: ‘I am afraid it is a virtue I cannot safely recommend in thee’, he wrote; ‘Thee rather needs courage and confidence and heart-boldness.’⁸⁷ One of Jones’ abiding personality traits, then, was to celebrate and cultivate natural human abilities.

This trait resonated with the general Liberal Christian optimism of the time and its concomitant desire to harness aspects of the latest psychological research. William James was one of many psychologists who felt that psychology had both a responsibility and the means to facilitate self-improvement.⁸⁸ His chapter on habit in his celebrated *Principles of Psychology* was seized on by many Christians, to the extent that the president of Brown, W. H. P. Faunce, told a Yale audience in 1908 that it had been ‘preached in a thousand pulpits’.⁸⁹ Habit was presented as

83 Jones, *Life in College*, p. 65.

84 Jones, *Finding the Trail*, p. 121.

85 See Jones, R. M., *A Small-Town Boy*, New York: MacMillan, 1941.

86 Quoted in Vining, *Friend of Life*, p. 48.

87 Quoted in Vining, *Friend of Life*, p. 94.

88 Holifield, E. B., *A History of Pastoral Care in America*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, p. 184.

89 Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care*, p. 187.

arising from willpower, an ethos that chimed with a widespread conviction that the secret of ‘character’ was self-mastery and self-control.⁹⁰ James emphasised their utility—habits save trouble because ‘to reproduce the effect, a less amount of the outward cause is required’—and provided guidelines on how to form them.⁹¹

Of interest here is how Jones treats habit in *Social Law*. He does not give an explicit reference to James, but, given his familiarity with *Principles* (he recalls with enthusiasm his discovery of it in one of his memoirs) and his esteem for James, whom he acknowledges in the Introduction as a ‘teacher of great influence’, it seems likely that he is drawing on James’ famous chapter.⁹² Moving beyond James’ stress on utility, Jones draws a spiritual conclusion. The ‘physical universe’, he explains, has ‘a running-down system’ (i.e., hot bodies cool down, organisms die).⁹³ In the ‘spiritual’ life, though, the ‘opposite principle’ is at work, as ‘the gains from our deeds are conserved and builded into the advancing power of life.’⁹⁴ This property, he says, finds expression in the Bible: ‘In Paul’s great phrase, which is literally true: “We are more than conquerors.”’⁹⁵ In practice, this means that ‘The things that once were hard duties which we did by sheer effort, we now do almost by second nature.’⁹⁶ In other words, James’ views on habit are—for good habits—here given a spiritual, biblically authenticated interpretation, in that the increase of goodness is a spiritual principle woven into human nature. While one might want to question Jones’ assessment, not to mention his neglect of the significance of bad habits, the point here is that for Jones the human effort required to form a habit needs to be seen in the context of a universe ordained by God that carries within it the means of transformation. This interpretation of human effort makes attributions of ‘mere’ humanism inappropriate.

The relationship that Jones saw between spiritual practices, human effort and transformation can be discerned through his comments about affirmation and negation mystics. Recall that both types of mystic search for God more assiduously than most, and this search presumably involved various spiritual practices. However, only the affirmation mystic translates the insights gained into action and thus wins ‘spiritual victory’, which, it seems reasonable to assume, involves spiritual transformation.⁹⁷ In other words, Jones seems to be saying that spiritual practice in and of itself is not transformative, but only insofar as

90 Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care*, p. 188.

91 James, W., *The Principles of Psychology*, Digireads, 2010 [1890], Vol. 1, p. 75.

92 Jones recounts his discovery of *Principles* in *The Trail of Life in College*, p. 180; Jones, *Social Law*, p. 21.

93 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 82.

94 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 83.

95 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 83.

96 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 83.

97 Jones, *Social Law*, p. 152.

the insights received as the result of this practice are lived out. We also need to bear in mind that Jones saw God as providing strength for obedience. That is, personal transformation is effected as God inspires and strengthens an individual in given tasks: 'The first step toward spiritual victory', Jones advised, 'is union and parallelism with the Divine Currents'.⁹⁸

In summary, Jones embraced both spiritual practices and human effort as part of the process of double-transformation that he associated with mysticism. This is not always obvious, both because he does not set out his views on spiritual practices systematically and because his emphasis on human effort has to be seen in its wider cultural and theistic context. He is absolutely clear, though, that both are necessary. Regarding personal transformation, 'Moral dexterity of soul and beauty of character are the result of human effort and of cooperation with God.'⁹⁹ Regarding societal transformation, 'Mere social propaganda and bare philanthropic activity untouched by a vision of the penetrating, co-operating presence of God as the resident power of all permanent advance are thin and weak.'¹⁰⁰ I suggest that this reliance on God mediated through spiritual practice is further evidence both that Rock's interpretation of Jones' mysticism is flawed and that any attribution of humanism to Jones needs to be seen as theistic.

Conclusion

Jones has been described as both a mystic and a humanist, and as endorsing both mysticism and humanism. The terms humanism and mysticism are open to multiple interpretations, but the attribution of both to the same person requires some explanation regarding the role of God and of human effort in personal and societal transformation. On the one hand, Rock's recent suggestion that Jones understood mysticism as a logical apprehension of the ethical fifth dimension is consistent with his suggestion that Jones embraced a 'religious humanism', but it fails to do justice to Jones' repeated insistence that mysticism is an experiential, affective relationship with a personal God and to his general alignment with the views of contemporaneous scholars of mysticism and with personal idealism. On the other hand, claims from various commentators that Jones is associated with a 'mere' or 'self-sufficient' humanism fail to do justice to Jones' insistence that God produces the fruits of the spirit in an individual and is the instigator of social change, and they fail to explain his lifelong spiritual practices of daily prayer, silence and Bible study that 'give God a chance'.

I have suggested that this tension arises partly because 'humanism' and 'mysticism' are ambiguous terms, which Jones himself does not define rigorously, and partly because a humanistic strand is indeed present in Jones' writings.

98 Jones, R. M., *Practical Christianity*, Memphis: General Books, [1905] 2012, p. 27.

99 Jones, R. M., *The Deeper Universe*, Kessinger, [1918], p. 16.

100 Jones, *Quakerism, A Spiritual Movement*, pp. 136–37.

He was convinced, for example, that spiritual progress required effort and a consistent intention to do good. This emphasis on human effort resonated with Jones' character and with the general Liberal Christian optimism, but has to be seen in the context of his wider theistic framework: Jones saw God as part of human nature and the possibility of spiritual progress as reflecting a spiritual law. From the perspective of mysticism, Jones' unequivocal preference for what he defined as affirmation mysticism emphasised that experience of God should find expression in action (whether this be societal reform or everyday good deeds), which transformed both the individual who had the experience and society. Jones, then, objected equally to action without God and to God without action. Even more than that, though, action and experience of God formed a 'virtuous circle', in that obedience to the promptings of God led to transformative action, which made one more sensitive to future promptings, and so on.

In 1932, Jones delivered a sermon at Trinity Church in Boston in which he drew attention to the 'stern limits' of a naturalistic humanism but praised a 'lofty type' of humanism that believes in 'man' because 'there is a beyond within him, because he is a potential child of God and may become a spiritual flame of the eternal light'.¹⁰¹ It is this theistic understanding of humanism that is the natural counterpart to my proposed understanding of Jones' affirmation mysticism as experience of an inherent, transformational relationship with a personal God.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr Mark Harris for ongoing supervision, and him, Dr Steven Sutcliffe and the anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to Sarah Horowitz, the librarian at Haverford, for sending me numerous scans of Jones' archived letters.

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101 Jones, R. M., '*Lighted Lives*', a sermon delivered at Trinity Church, Boston, 11 December 1932. Retrieved from <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qhoa/rmjll.htm> (accessed 11 November 2017).

make an excellent subject for a PhD. Her thesis explores the ideas in *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, focussing on how Jones relied on William James to redefine traditional interpretations of the Inner Light.

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