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‘Evidences of Hysteria’: Rufus Jones and the Miraculous

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Abstract

This paper investigates the tension between Rufus Jones’ Quaker mysticism and miracles recorded in early Quakerism. It uses George Fox’s *Book of Miracles* to establish early Quaker beliefs and compares these recorded beliefs with Jones’ writing concerning miracles and mysticism, arguing that Jones’ conception of miracles was distinct from Fox’s. Jones often refrained from definite claims regarding the nature of miracles, but he did not claim the miracles of early Quakerism. The paper provides context for understanding distinguishing features, according to Jones, between the miraculous and the mystical.

Keywords

Quaker, miracle, Rufus Jones, rational, spiritual, mysticism, miracle, healing, psychological, George Fox

Rufus Jones, a prominent Quaker and professor at Haverford College, revolutionised Quakerism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and strove to introduce mysticism as a main tenet of the religion. While miracles were not the primary subject of Jones’ work, this paper intends to explore Jones’ understanding of miracles. Miracles were recorded as significant to both early Quakerism and George Fox, but Jones never published his explicit thoughts about miracles. Thus, a gap exists in the archive. However, through an analysis of Jones’ writing and influences, his desire for a rational, relevant Quakerism, which classified only the most abstract religious occurrences as miracles, becomes clear. Rufus Jones, as a Quaker author and religious leader, often avoided making concrete claims about miracles, especially the variety of miracles exposed by George Fox. At the same time, when he did claim miracles, they represented phenomena distinct from the miracles practised and endorsed by Fox and early Quakers.

Early Quaker Miracles

The earliest iteration of Quakerism valued miracles and readily classified events as miracles. At the same time, miracles inhabited a contested role within and beyond the Society of Friends from the beginning of Quakerism. Extant records unquestionably prove that early Quakers believed in miracles. Henry Cadbury's twentieth-century scholarship into a lost text, *George Fox's Book of Miracles*, recorded by George Fox, reconstructed many of these early miracles. Most were performed by Fox, but 'other Friends had their experiences'.¹ Many miracles were 'instances of miraculous and instantaneous healing'. Some were reports of 'recovery from death'. Rare 'miracles of the confirmatory type', confirming the presence of God through a thunderclap, for example, also populated the book.² Further, Cadbury explained that Quakers possessed an 'easy belief in miracles'.³ As such, they would readily and unsparingly define events as miracles.⁴ Cadbury's analysis of Quaker miracles depicted early Friends as wholeheartedly endorsing them. Among early Friends, a sincere belief in miracles was common. They found evidence frequently, demonstrating their sincere desire to encounter miracles as well as a Quaker belief in the ubiquity of miracles in the quotidian.

At the same time, from the inception of Quakerism, miracles were not without suspicion. As such, from the beginning they occupied a complicated role in Quakerism and in interactions both internal and external. According to Rosalind Johnson, 'the language of miracles', frequently 'used to describe otherwise inexplicable events' contradicted 'Protestant rationalism'.⁵ Friends' standing in broader society, and the acceptance of Quakers, was then imperilled by their belief in miracles. Cadbury substantiated this idea, explaining that 'the earliest ... reference to a reputed [Quaker] miracle ... comes from anti-Quaker sources'.⁶ Moreover, complaints used to 'ridicule' and disparage Quakers often referred to their purported miracles.⁷ Broader debates over the veracity of miracles, coupled with their use to discredit Quaker belief, established the unstable position of miracles in early Quakerism. Although endorsed and performed by Fox and other early Friends, miracles posed a threat to the credibility of Quakerism.

The threat of miracles was further confirmed by Fox's successors, such as Thomas Ellwood and William Penn. Cadbury reported that these Friends

1 Cadbury, H. J., et al., *George Fox's "Book of Miracles"*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 2000, p. 5.

2 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, pp. 6–7.

3 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, p. 15.

4 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, pp. 16–32.

5 Johnson, R., 'The Case of the Distracted Maid: Healing and Cursing in Early Quaker History', *Quaker Studies* 21/1 (2016), p. 29. <https://doi.org/10.3828/quaker.2016.21.1.4>.

6 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, p. 19.

7 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, pp. 17–21.

disseminated Fox's writing but eliminated mentions of miracles,⁸ lending credence to their instability within Quaker circles and complicating the legacy of miracles for later generations of Quakers. While the originators of Quakerism had exalted miracles, later leaders had strived to remove the influence of miracles. The status of early Quaker miracles was contested and uncertain, and Rufus Jones inherited this disputed, complicated status. Further, by the time Jones inherited Quakerism, miracles had been edited out of the religion.

Rufus Jones on George Fox's Miracles

Jones, a contemporary of Cadbury's, authored a foreword to *George Fox's Book of Miracles*. In it he questioned the veracity of Fox's examples, clarifying that he did not fully trust the healing attributed to Fox. He also implied that he did not consider healings miracles. In his foreword, Jones refrained from a full condemnation of healing miracles; nonetheless, he expressed disbelief and doubt about Fox's reputed miracles. He qualified Fox's purported miracles multiple times, calling into question the 'factual aspect in these miracle accounts'.⁹ Jones acknowledged that the *initial* events that occurred were 'substantially trustworthy', but also contended that any story is susceptible to exaggeration.¹⁰ While Jones refrained from a full critique of Fox's honesty, he did not believe in Fox's miracles as they were *recorded*. Alleging exaggeration, Jones believed that the events stemmed from a more credible original event but suspected that the purported miracles did not occur.

In order to attribute any meaning to Fox's miracles, Jones classified Fox's miracles as exclusively historically significant, disclosing his distrust of Fox-type miracles. In his foreword, Jones explained that Fox had fulfilled an expectation born of an 'atmosphere ... charged with the expectation of the coming of an apostolic founder' who would 'attest his commission by authentic ... miracles'.¹¹ He later concluded a segment discussing Fox's legacy by urging readers to read '*Book of Miracles* in light of this historical background'.¹² Jones' emphasis on the context in which Fox performed his miracles betrayed Jones' perspective on the miracles described. The miracles were of little significance to Jones beyond their history, and he qualified them as outdated and relegated to the past. He laboured to establish a historical context in which miracles were required of an influential leader, but he did not emphasise any significance beyond the historical. Thus, in his foreword, Jones explained that he found no modern religious significance in Fox's miracles.

8 Cadbury, *Book of Miracles*, pp. 36–40.

9 Jones, R., 'Foreword', in Cadbury, H. J., (ed.), *George Fox's "Book of Miracles"*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 2000, p. vii.

10 Jones, 'Foreword', pp. vii–viii.

11 Jones, 'Foreword', p. vii.

12 Jones, 'Foreword', p. vii.

Although Jones dismissed Fox's miracles as outdated and untrustworthy, the condemnation did not extend to a complete shunning of the miraculous. Complicating his tenor, which was thus far suspicious of miracles, Jones concluded his foreword by pondering 'whether [Fox's healings] should be classed as "miracles"'.¹³ Suggesting the question, he explicitly depreciated the actions performed by Fox by refusing to endorse them as miracles. At the same time, Jones hinted at his definition of miracles. While Fox's healing did not meet his criteria, Jones did consider the category of 'miracles' material enough to encompass certain occurrences and not others. However, although he intimated that some miracles did exist, Jones did not elaborate further. Thus, while Jones' foreword to Cadbury's *George Fox's Book of Miracles* explicitly detailed Jones' unwillingness to classify early Quaker healings as miracles, it also raised a question: what did Rufus Jones consider miraculous?

Rufus Jones on Mysticism and Religious Experience

Drawing from William James' work in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Jones' writings on religion and mysticism, an opposition between Jones' class of mysticism and Fox's experiences of the miraculous became clear. Considering James' influence on Jones' thinking, it is likely that Jones dismissed miracles along James' guidelines in favour of the rational mysticism he promoted. James, who identified himself as a psychologist,¹⁴ greatly influenced Jones' thinking, and similarities between James' definition of verifiable religious experiences and Jones' own thinking existed.¹⁵ According to James, the origin of a religious experience was not relevant.¹⁶ Instead, the value and validity of an experience should be determined according to its 'immediate luminousness ... philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness'.¹⁷ In James' results-based criteria, then, irrational or illogical experiences were not credible religious experiences. Rufus Jones seemed to agree, given his dismissal of Fox's miracles as unreasonable or irrational, that they were exaggerated.

Jones' depiction of mysticism reflected a desire to be perceived as reasonable and rational. In this pursuit he dismissed all phenomena, including miracles, that could be understood as unsound. Rufus Jones' mysticism was dismissive of 'the epiphenomena of mystical experience'.¹⁸ Jones condemned 'trances, losses

13 Jones, 'Foreword', p. ix.

14 James, W., *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Philosophical Library/Open Road, 2015, p. 8, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/haverford/detail.action?docID=1952721> (accessed 24/03/2022).

15 Rock, H., 'Rufus Jones Never Did Establish That Quakerism Is a Mystical Religion', *Quaker Studies* 21/1 (2016), p. 54, <https://doi.org/10.3828/quaker.2016.21.1.5>.

16 James, *Varieties*, p. 30.

17 James, *Varieties*, p. 26.

18 Rock, 'Rufus Jones Never Did Establish', p. 54.

of consciousness, automatism, vision of lights, audition of voices, “stigmata,” and such-like’ as ‘evidences of hysteria’, not the ‘Divine Presence’.¹⁹ Dismissing occurrences that traditionally accompanied mystical experiences, Jones’ mysticism defined itself as free of what Jones deemed hysterical. Jones’ mysticism was a controlled, rational process. Although it alienated itself from previous accounts of mystical experience, his mysticism consciously imbued itself with reason, distancing Jones, and his theology, from unnatural occurrences. He probably considered miracles of the Fox variety a similarly unnatural occurrence.

Once he defined his rational mysticism, Jones employed it to claim its value to be greater than that of miracle, if not the foremost kind of religious experience. Two case studies from Jones’ *Studies in Mystical Religion* illustrate this process. Jones considered mysticism to be more accessible, and scientific, than miracle. In *Studies*, he related an experience of St Francis’ during which he heard ‘in the silence ... a voice which reached the innermost depth of his being’.²⁰ Jones explained that St Francis was:

a person of the most extraordinary mystical nature ... , and our psychological laboratories have given us evidence that persons of this type may overpass the normal and the ordinary without any necessity of calling in miracle.²¹

Thus, Jones believed mysticism to be both scientifically supported and likely to occur in ordinary life. Comparing mystical experiences to miracle, Jones seemed to assert that mysticism is based on reason, and mystical experiences can occur without any miraculous intervention. Mysticism, and mysticism alone, yielded meaningful experiences, rendering miracles obsolete.

Jones additionally believed that mysticism outpaced miracle in its religious value and veracity. Depicting the biblical Paul as a mystic, Jones explained that Paul was an ‘inward man ... joined to the lord in one Spirit’²² who ‘set slight value on extraordinary phenomena’.²³ Jones continued that ‘[Paul’s] profound mysticism’ was not to be ‘sought in glossolalia or in ecstatic vision’ nor proved by ‘ecstasy, tongue, or miracle’.²⁴ Jones’ words confirmed his belief in the value of mystical experience above fringe, obscure occurrences. Jones depicted Paul as a mystic who did not resort to epiphenomenal experience, but who was able, through mystic connection, to achieve a higher religious ranking. Jones believed that, through mysticism, one could commune with God in a meaningful way, similar to Paul. Additionally, Jones grouped miracle with the sort of epiphenomena he

19 Jones, R., *Studies in Mystical Religion*, London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1923, pp. 226–98, quoted in Rock, ‘Rufus Jones’, p. 51.

20 Jones, *Studies*, p. 155. <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do&id=GALE%7CCR BZRA928181715&v=2.1&u=have 19984&it=r&xp=NCCO&sw=w> (accessed 24/03/2022).

21 Jones, *Studies*, p. 155.

22 Jones, *Studies*, p. 15.

23 Jones, *Studies*, p. 12.

24 Jones, *Studies*, pp. 12–25.

loathed and believed were not evidence of the 'Divine Presence'. Tellingly, he demoted the status of miracles performed by individuals below mysticism. Jones, then, conceptualised the value of mysticism to surmount the holiness attained or exemplified by miracle.

Rufus Jones sought to disregard any occurrence that could be classified as unreasonable. He redefined mysticism to encompass a more rational set of experiences, expressing his intolerance for eccentric, implausible occurrences. In the process, he made clear a desire to repudiate Fox-type miracles and similar experiences. However, Jones did consider some things to be miracles.

Rufus Jones on Miracles

Beyond defining his distrust in Fox-type miracles, Jones' writing divulged that he considered lofty, existential processes to be miracles. I have established that Jones did not define miracles like those performed by Fox as such, nor did he trust their veracity. Further, he pursued rational, reasonable religious experiences, while doubting illogical ones. Taken together, and supplemented by his writing, his definition of miracles becomes clear. Jones defined miracles as truly unfathomable, incomprehensible workings of God. In *The World Within*, he referred to 'another life beyond' as a 'miracle',²⁵ explaining that 'there are mystery and miracle in the heavenly life'.²⁶ Further, Jones considered the effect of Christ on Saul/Paul's 'inner life' to be the 'top miracle in Christian history'.²⁷ Without reservation, Jones deemed Heaven and the workings of Christ on a person to be truly miraculous. Lacking a rational, logical, reasonable explanation for the Heaven in which he believed, Jones felt certain enough to describe it as 'containing miracle'. Perhaps because Christ and Heaven were matters of faith and not reason, they constituted true miracles. Perhaps following James' definition of legitimate religious experience, he considered these manifestations of miracle to be credible. Regardless of the reason, which he did not publish, Jones considered only direct manifestations of God and God's power to be miracles.

Conclusion

Although he never explicitly defined what miracles meant to him, Rufus Jones held a definition of what constituted miracle, what did not and what belonged in his Quakerism. Diverging from George Fox and early Quakers, Jones did not value quotidian miracles like those defined in *Book of Miracles*. Instead, he favoured a rational mysticism. Jones summarily dismissed phenomena related to

25 Jones, R. M., *The World Within*, New York: MacMillan, 1930, p. 96. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044058264771>.

26 Jones, *The World Within*, p. 16.

27 Jones, *The World Within*, p. 158.

miracles, perhaps in pursuit of the *reasonableness* William James employed to define significant religious experience. Nevertheless, as he hinted, Jones did classify some occurrences as miraculous. He used the category miracle, however, to include a small number of events and processes, such as Heaven or what he perceived to be God's actions in his version of Quakerism.

Author Details

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